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YOUTH AND ENVIRONMENTALISM IN POST-SOCIALIST ROMANIA AND MOLDOVA

Introduction

During consecutive trips to Chişinău, Moldova and Cluj, Romania in the spring of 2012, I observed a sharp contrast between the forms of environmental activism present in these neighboring countries. In Chişinău, I attended a worldwide Earth Hour event with young environmentalists, officials from the Ministry of Environment, and community members, featuring educational activities and an upbeat candlelit concert. Several days later, I met with a group of young people planning a project to address what they termed a “lack of environmental consciousness” in Moldova by teaching young people about sustainable development. They aimed to create a network of government institutions, NGOs, private companies, and experts that could find “economically sound solutions” to environmental challenges in Moldova.

In Cluj, I attended a demonstration marking six months since a small group of activists had occupied a local hotel in order to bring attention to the Roşia Montană mining project. I talked to young activists involved in the campaign, which has been fighting since the year 2000 to stop a Canadian corporation and the Romanian government from creating the largest opencast gold mine in Europe. The campaign not only stages protests but also makes legal challenges against the company in an attempt to ensure the protection of the environment as well as several villages close to the mining site and pre-Roman mining galleries that would be destroyed by the mine.

My understanding of these two projects builds on my experiences during fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Moldova and twelve months in Romania between 2009 and 2012. In this paper, I argue that while young environmentalists in Moldova in some ways embrace a green neoliberal paradigm, those involved in the Save Roşia

Montană (*Salvați Roșia Montană*, or SRM) campaign in Romania utilize narratives of endangerment – of the environment as well as the people and national heritage of Roșia Montană – to critique this same paradigm. Both approaches resonate with their respective larger societies; the former reflects young Moldovans' lack of confidence in the government, commitment to modernization, and tendency to search for solutions outside of Moldova, while the latter reflects young Romanians' anger with the government and its ties to industry, as well as uncertainty about the effects of Europeanization and globalization on their country.

To understand these differences, it is essential to consider the particular contexts in which the movements have emerged. I start by giving a brief overview of the similarities and differences between the environmental communities in the two countries, examining the influence of historical, environmental, economic, and political variables. Then I focus on two specific groups, Green Moldova and the Save Roșia Montană campaign, in order to illustrate how the ideologies, discourses, and practices of the groups reflect two different approaches to environmentalism. In particular, I focus on the movements' differing attitudes toward political engagement and neoliberal capitalism, and I consider how these attitudes contribute to their divergent narratives and actions.

Overview of environmentalism in Moldova and Romania

Anthropologist Kay Milton (1996: 33) defines environmentalists broadly as people who have a “concern to protect the environment through human effort and responsibility” and are therefore labeled, by themselves and others, as environmentalists. Most individuals that I encountered matching this description in both Romania and Moldova were under 35, with the notable exception of a group of middle-aged male scientists who head the five strongest environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Chișinău.¹ These groups arguably make up what Steven Sampson (2002) classifies as an elite class of NGOs, as they control much of the aid that comes to Moldova for environmental projects. Smaller and rural groups in Moldova complained that it is difficult to compete with these powerful organizations for funding. Many environmentalists in both countries are affiliated with NGOs, most of which are urban-based or at least have urban connections even if they focus on rural projects. Many base themselves in Chișinău and Bucharest in particular, as NGOs in the capital enjoy greater access to funding (Cellarius 2004).²

Environmentalists in Romania and Moldova expressed similar complaints related to the contexts in which they work; the perception of widespread corruption, a lack of media attention, and low public awareness about environmental problems are common concerns. They have also adopted some similar approaches, such as a focus on educating young people about the importance of protecting the environment. Projects carried out by the NGOs tend to follow the environmental narratives preferred by Western donors, particularly those related to sustainable development and green neoliberalism, discussed further below (Goldman 2005, Harper 2001, Schwartz 2006). In both Romania and Moldova, urban projects tend to focus on individual actions such as recycling and riding bicycles, while rural projects often focus on the protection of biodiversity and saving endangered or unique species.

Beyond these similarities, there are many differences between the environmental movements in Romania and Moldova. In Moldova, the environmental community is small and fragmented by age, urban or rural location, and Romanian or Russian language use, mirroring divisions within Moldovan society more generally. Nonetheless, nearly all projects are embedded in the country's modernization strategy. The Romanian movement is larger and more developed, but also divided. The most prominent groups in Bucharest depend significantly on corporate funding, while others, including the Save Roşia Montană campaign, critique this approach and use international funding and donations to fight against corporate power and its effects on the environment and the Romanian people.

Environmental history

Contrasting environmental histories have helped to shape the emergence of the Moldovan and Romanian environmental movements. During the Soviet period, Moldova underwent very little industrialization and remained primarily an agricultural country; thus its current problems relate mainly to agriculture, specifically the overuse of chemicals. The Soviet government provided large amounts of chemicals, which encouraged farmers to over-apply them, leading to run-off into surface water and eventually groundwater. Although chemical usage dropped after 1991, it has recently increased again as Western organizations have encouraged agricultural intensification, so drinking water continues to be contaminated in many rural communities. In Romania, large-scale industrialization led to widespread ecological destruction in some areas,

such as air and water contamination from mining projects, soil pollution due to industrial projects in agricultural areas, and water pollution from agricultural projects in the Danube Delta (Schmidt 2001, Turnock 1996).

Neither country saw the emergence of a serious environmental movement during the communist period, although such movements did emerge elsewhere in the region. In the Soviet Union during perestroika, various environmental movements appeared, but as Jane Dawson (2000: 33) argues, these groups “represented far more than simple crusades for environmental purity”, being “in fact political movements aimed at protesting Moscow’s imperial control over the periphery”. In various places across the USSR, groups of activists came together to protest the effects of industrialization, focusing on issues such as nuclear energy and the disappearance of the Aral Sea due to large-scale irrigation projects (Feshbach and Friendly 1992). The anti-nuclear movements in particular had strong nationalist undertones and thus largely disappeared when the Soviet Republics regained sovereignty (Dawson 1996). As Moldova did not have a nuclear industry or other large-scale, environmentally destructive projects, a strong environmental movement did not emerge here. However, during the late Soviet period in Moldova, concerned ecologists worked on combatting problems such as the overuse of chemicals in agriculture. Jane Dawson (2000) points out in her discussion of environmental clubs in the USSR that “rather than focusing on broad environmental demands...these associations tended to focus on specific threats to their local communities”. Ecologists in Moldova, a largely agricultural republic, thus focused on chemical use and its consequences for human health. Like the ecologists in Soviet Moldova, many present-day Moldovan environmentalists continue to focus on small-scale local problems, often related to agriculture and rural modernization.

In Central and Eastern Europe, communist regimes in countries such as Hungary and Czechoslovakia largely overlooked environmentalists as harmless nature lovers or mushroom collectors. Environmental activism thus became a space in which diverse groups could come together to protest not only environmental neglect and destruction by those in power but also communism more generally (Snajdr 2008). As in the USSR, most of these groups disappeared or changed significantly after the fall of communism, though this history of environmental activism created a space for such activities to reemerge after 1989. In Romania, by contrast, the Ceaușescu regime strictly controlled even environmental groups, so true grassroots movements did not emerge during the communist

period (O'Brien 2005). Simina Dragomirescu et al. (1998: 171) point out that "immediately after the revolution conservationists came out of the woodwork and many ecological groups arose" in Romania. Two ecological parties gained seats in the 1990 parliamentary election, but this initial enthusiasm dwindled as the dire economic situation led people to favor job creation over environmental protection. Thomas O'Brien (2005: 6) adds that the popularity of the environment as a topic of concern during the early "transition" years at least in part reflects the fact that "general opposition to the regime was still limited through state control of the media and the continued existence of the *Securitate*", the Romanian secret police. As a result, environmentalism became a safe arena in which to express concerns during the early post-communist years, as it had elsewhere before 1989. Without a strong history of environmentalism, Romania's environmental movement grew more slowly than in many neighboring countries; nevertheless, resistance movements have built steadily in opposition to destructive large-scale projects.

Funding acquisition and EU integration

An examination of funding and relationships to Europe highlights further differences between Romanian and Moldovan environmentalism. Most environmental NGOs in Moldova rely heavily on funds from international environmental or development organizations, discussed further below. In Romania, most groups also rely at least partially on such funding; however, some also receive funding from private Romanian corporations. In fact, two of the most active NGOs in Bucharest rely almost exclusively on funding from companies such as oil and beer producers, banks, and cell phone providers. Leaders of these NGOs explained to me that corporate funding is preferable to funding from national or European sources, which they consider scarce and too difficult to obtain due to bureaucracy. By contrast, they find private companies – often large polluters – eager to contribute money to environmental causes through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Such programs have been criticized for distracting the public from questioning firms' operations, and as ways for companies to profit commercially by boosting their image without making significant environmental improvements (Benson, 2008, Welker, 2009).³

These particular Bucharest-based NGOs reported both positive and negative aspects of using private funding for projects. Although the initial proposal might have to be rewritten several times, once they acquire the

money, they can use it as they wish without having to request permission for changes or submit detailed spending reports. Such funding, however, often forces groups to narrow their focus to events such as tree planting and river cleanup days, as corporate employees can easily participate in these activities and promote their company's "green" image. Nevertheless, they expressed satisfaction with the freedom to carry out diverse projects while avoiding the paperwork required by other funders. Larger sums may be available from European funds, which would allow for a broader vision and longer-term projects, but the relative ease of obtaining corporate funding has so far been too tempting to resist. One group told me they might resort to European funds in the future if private funding decreases due to the economic crisis.

Environmentalists in Romania had mixed feelings about the impact of EU integration and regulations on their work. While they complained that European funding requires too much paperwork and places too many constraints on their projects, they also listed a lack of enforcement of EU regulations as an obstacle to environmental protection. One activist told me that the EU had been more powerful before Romania joined the EU in 2007, in that they could threaten to deny the country's accession if they did not meet expectations. Now EU interference is limited, as breaking environmental laws is considered an internal affair.⁴ Only if a project involves EU funds can the EU impose sanctions for broken rules. Some thus see EU rules as potentially helpful, if only the government had the capacity and the will to enforce them.

In Moldova, due to the poor local economy and a perception that Moldovan companies are uninterested in investing in the environment, environmental groups have not attempted to obtain private funding, preferring to look elsewhere. Romanian environmentalists commonly perceive that much of the European funding available before 2007 to help Romania meet EU standards "moved east" after accession. As part of the European Neighborhood, Moldova does attract some funding from European sources, and they are working on adopting European regulations with the intention of one day joining the EU. However, the inconsistent availability of European funds, combined with a lack of sufficient funding from their own National Environment Fund, leads most Moldovan environmental NGOs to apply for external funding from international or foreign organizations. By forming partnerships directly with international entities, local NGOs can bypass what they see as a weak, corrupt state; one NGO director told me that securing foreign funds "forces the government to cooperate". This

arrangement illustrates what James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002: 994) call a new transnational governmentality in which local NGOs, states, and international organizations can be considered “horizontal contemporaries”. The weakness of the Moldovan state has led to the destabilization of “existing hierarchies of spatial scales”, so that local actors can connect directly to global entities (Gille and Ó Riain 2002: 278). Zsuzsa Gille (2000: 261) argues that due to this new arrangement, “global forces...are less constraining and more enabling than they once were”, so that “local actors can use their imaginations to put those global forces to work on their behalf”.

While direct access to international funders has created new opportunities, Moldovan activists, echoing their Romanian counterparts, reported that sometimes the priorities of their donors do not match local needs, a common scenario in NGO work (Ghodsee 2005, Phillips 2008). For example, the leader of an NGO working to install dry EcoSan toilets in villages with insufficient access to running water described problems she had had working with a particular for-profit funder, which tried to treat the NGO as a service provider and impose certain criteria. The project stalled for a whole year while she fought with the funder, refusing to change practices she knew were effective, such as listening to local ideas and conducting follow-up visits. Her persistence paid off, as the NGO’s relationship with the funder had improved. Others have found creative ways to reconcile local needs and donor expectations.⁵ For instance, a rural NGO working through the Chişinău branch of an international development program wanted to obtain money to test well water quality in several villages whose groundwater had been polluted with nitrates from fertilizers. As the funder, another international organization, did not support sanitation projects, the NGO focused its application on the negative impact of water pollution on biodiversity in a nearby river. The NGO then used the money to test drinking water and develop a remediation plan. The representative managing the funds told me that the only reason the organization granted Moldova the funding was that the affected river flows into international waters. By appealing to donor expectations, the NGO managed to tap into and inventively use otherwise unattainable funds. These examples illustrate both the frustrations and benefits of being located in a small country generally overlooked by international entities. Although they sometimes feel invisible, some Moldovan environmentalists also feel more freedom to use funds creatively than do many of their Romanian counterparts, who often feel beholden to the demands of corporate funders or stifled by EU bureaucracy.

Divergent environmental histories and political and economic variables in Moldova and Romania have clearly resulted in the emergence of two distinct environmental communities. The case studies presented below further illustrate these differences while also demonstrating the diversity within both communities. In Moldova, as in the examples above, a group of activists focuses on local, small-scale projects and displays a willingness to follow donor narratives. The young environmentalists depart from the traditional focus on rural agricultural issues by bringing environmental awareness to the city. In Romania, evoking the radical environmental groups at the end of communism elsewhere in the region, a campaign fights against a large-scale, environmentally destructive project as well as the larger political-economic system. Their critical approach contrasts with the corporate sponsored projects in Bucharest described above.

The next section explores how a weak state, a dire economic situation, and a globally-connected youth generation have given rise to an environmental movement that is firmly embedded in a Moldovan modernization project. I focus on the ideologies expressed by the participants in a project called Ecoweek, and how well these correspond to their discourses and practices.

Ecoweek and Green Moldova: Political engagement and green neoliberalism

In April 2010, a group of young, urban Moldovans carried out a project called Ecoweek. Led by Violeta,⁶ a 21-year-old Moldovan woman, Ecoweek involved about 30 high school and college students who had applied to participate in the project and were chosen through a group interview process. Along with Violeta's colleague Irina, an economics student, I helped to interview the applicants for the project. I also participated in the week's events, including educational sessions, a trip to the local wastewater treatment plant, a movie and networking night, and the planning and execution of small environmental projects.

According to Violeta, Ecoweek aimed to impart global and local environmental information to young people, to give participants a chance to plan and carry out practical activities, and to create networking opportunities. The larger aim of the project was to start an environmental movement of young people, which the organizers felt did not exist in Moldova. At the end of Ecoweek, Violeta and others formed a Facebook group called

Green Moldova in order to maintain the ties created during Ecoweek and to attract new members. Several meetings and events, such as annual Earth Hour celebrations, took place in the two years following Ecoweek. Violeta and Green Moldova then began to plan a new, larger project, which aims to continue to raise environmental awareness in Moldova as well as to encourage the development of a green economy in Moldova.

Ideology: weak state, individual actions

During educational sessions that took place on the first two days of Ecoweek, Violeta expressed her view that political engagement is a waste of time. Like many Moldovans, she sees the state as weak and its politicians as corrupt, leading her to conclude that any involvement in politics would be ineffective.⁷ Violeta thus stressed to Ecoweek participants the importance of seeking ways to effect change without going through political channels. She argued that working with the Ministry of Environment makes no sense because of its small budget; demanding that the state pay attention to environmental issues makes no sense either, because the state is so corrupt and incompetent that it will not listen. As a group of students, she went on, they had no way to influence politics in Moldova. The students often expressed similar views. In discussing ways to address pollution, one participant suggested that the government could impose new standards and collect taxes from polluters. In response, Adrian, a high school senior, asked where the tax money would go. "You get corruption out of this", he insisted. During an Ecoweek follow-up meeting with a handful of participants, I asked if they agreed with Violeta's view of politics. They did. Vova, for example, said that politics "is a power world, and we can't go there".

During the Ecoweek educational sessions, a pessimistic attitude about the incompetence of the Moldovan state often contributed to a defeatism when discussing ways to protect Moldova's environment. At a certain point Violeta became frustrated, saying,

I am not a person who does believe a lot in politics. Politics is one ruling force of the world. But politics is created by people, right? Who are those politicians who sit in the Duma, in the Parliament? They are just people... who have their own understanding of the world. And those politicians are not doing the things we like; they're not doing the things that are sustainable. Okay, so let them do what they want. We are also people with our own

will, our own power, and we can also change something. Although we are still students...we are the way. We [are] the people who in five, maybe ten years [will] be the decision makers, okay? And it all starts from us.

In accordance with their views on the inefficacy of political engagement, Violeta and the Ecoweek participants based their activities on the premise that change must come from them rather than from the top. They decided to educate themselves about environmental problems and then teach others, especially other young people, and lead by example, a decision that guided the projects they carried out. These included an art project for children, handing out stickers listing ways to “save the planet”, distributing recycling information, bicycling through Chişinău to promote an alternative means of transportation, and encouraging people to trade their disposable plastic bags for reusable canvas ones.

The participants’ choice of projects reflects not only a response to the perceived uselessness of engaging in politics, but also a desire to connect to the global environmental movement. During the second day of Ecoweek, participants expressed satisfaction that they were finally learning about “real” environmentalism, in contrast to the local environmental messages they considered inferior, such as “Don’t throw trash on the streets”. In planning the project, Violeta looked for assistance, ideas, and expertise from outside of Moldova. She acquired German and American funding to support the project, and she recruited one American and one German ecologist to lead educational sessions. In virtually all of the environmental projects I came across in Moldova, planners sought international funding, expertise, or both. I found throughout my research more generally that Moldovans tend to seek solutions outside their borders, often by necessity, as evidenced by the high rate of emigration in response to a weak economy at home. Many who stay in Moldova also have an international outlook; young people in Chişinău especially have a strong global awareness. In discussing their motivations to apply for Ecoweek, many participants mentioned a desire to make connections and practice their English in addition to learning about the environment.

Discourse: green neoliberalism and ecological modernization

Young Moldovan environmentalists’ focus on outside solutions has contributed to the tendency of many to follow a green neoliberal framework. As detailed by Michael Goldman (2005:7), the “green

neoliberal” paradigm emerged in the 1990s when the World Bank adopted a sustainable development framework and incorporated it into its neoliberal economic agenda focusing on economic growth. This paradigm, and its neoliberal conservation approach that ostensibly seeks to protect nature by commodifying it, has since become the dominant approach to development, despite the difficulties inherent in using a capitalist paradigm to solve the very problems that it created (Büscher et al. 2012, Heynen et al. 2007).

Despite Moldovans’ often-ambivalent attitudes toward Western development, a sense of how “the West” judges them encourages at times a relatively uncritical acceptance of Western ideas and “expert” advice. Positive attitudes about Western approaches certainly affected the choice of narratives used by Ecoweek participants. Most strikingly, especially in comparison to the Romanian environmentalists I discuss below, these narratives often followed the ecological modernization framework favored by the European Union (EU). This approach, related to green neoliberalism, assumes that further economic development can be undertaken to improve ecological outcomes (Baker 2007). With a preference for market-based strategies and technological solutions, it “uses cost-benefit analysis rather than moral argument” and “eschews biocentrism and other more radical strands of environmentalism in favor of accommodating capitalism” (Guldbrandsen and Holland 2001: 126). Thaddeus Guldbrandsen and Dorothy Holland (2001: 132) argue further that

the spread of ecological modernization and its accommodation to corporate environmentalism (and its deployment of ‘sustainable development’)... threatens to undermine the possibility of grassroots politics. It threatens as well the moral and political standpoint of social justice issues and more critical versions of environmentalism.

During Ecoweek, which included many economics students, some discussions revolved around the development of a green economy based on neoliberal principles. While Violeta herself expressed doubts about the ability of capitalism to result in environmental protection, the American expert and most of the students agreed that this was possible. During a networking event during Ecoweek, in which Violeta hoped to bring together people from different parts of the environmental community, two industry representatives presented their companies. One was trying to introduce wind turbines into Moldova, and the other talked about the great potential for alternative energy in Moldova.

Two years after Ecoweek, when I returned to Moldova to participate in Earth Hour, I found that even Violeta had adopted narratives relating to building a green economy. In a funding application for a new, larger project Violeta had conceived, she wrote, “Environmental consciousness and action are perfectly compatible with economic development”. Several factors help to explain this shift. In Moldova, where international aid organizations have a strong presence and much public discourse focuses on economic development, a form of environmentalism that fits with neoliberal capitalism may seem like the path of least resistance. Furthermore, the ecological modernization approach attracts Violeta and others because of its claim to be “apolitical”. By masking the role of political forces, it presents the creation of a green economy as a neutral way to initiate change without having to become involved in politics. By contrast, according to this framework, “forms of environmentalism not encompassed by ecological modernization are ‘political’ and so must temper their positions”, a view that further threatens critical forms of environmentalism (Guldbrandsen and Holland 2001: 132).

Practice: political engagement

While participants’ ideology about the futility of political engagement strongly influenced the dialogue during Ecoweek’s planning meetings as well as the educational sessions, in fact the project did involve the Ministry of Environment. Violeta invited her friend, a new vice-minister of the environment, to give a presentation during a networking event midweek. While Ecoweek participants complained the next day that the vice-minister had said nothing to demonstrate any action taken by the Ministry, his participation had nonetheless presented political involvement as a real possibility. Indeed, as suggested in her speech, above, while Violeta feels that young people cannot have an impact on politics at present, she also feels confident that they will get this chance in the future. This contrasts strongly with the views of Romanian environmentalists, described below, who protest against the government and see no possibility of breaking into what they consider a strong, corrupt political system, or even meaningfully engaging with politicians. Of course, Moldova’s much smaller size plays an important role here; that Violeta has a good friend in the Ministry of Environment indicates that participation in government is within reach here, while in Romania the political class is seen as much further removed from society.

Dragoș, another friend of Violeta's, also presented at the Ecoweek networking event, telling the audience that "everything is possible", and that constantly complaining and protesting does nothing. "We should instead promote actions in favor of the environment", he insisted. Dragoș had worked for environmental NGOs before starting the first environmental consulting firm in Moldova. In 2011, Dragoș also became a vice-minister of the environment. When I saw him in April 2011, he described to me the challenges he was having integrating into the Ministry, where "the Communists" seemed intent on making his life difficult, but he also maintained some optimism. Several Ecoweek participants later took part in government-sponsored projects, such as Hai Moldova, a countrywide trash cleanup day, and Youth Parliament, a program affiliated with the Moldovan Parliament that sometimes debates environmental issues. Thus, although Moldovans view their government officials as corrupt, and talk about their rejection of political engagement, in practice they do not treat the system as so impenetrable that they cannot find ways to participate. Moreover, many have confidence that, like Dragoș, they will eventually have the opportunity to participate directly in politics.

Although Violeta, the driving force behind Ecoweek, talked about the need to completely ignore politics and the inability of capitalism to solve ecological problems, the activities carried out during the week and beyond did not always follow these ideas. In addition to the focus on changing individual behavior, the Green Moldova activists engaged with the Ministry of Environment and to some extent accepted green neoliberal ideas, at least for the sake of attracting funding. The next section describes a much different approach to environmentalism appearing in Romania, illustrated by the Save Roșia Montană campaign. As discussed above, while the environmental community in Romania does include those who obtain support from private companies' corporate social responsibility programs, another more radical type of environmentalism has also developed. Like the Green Moldova activists, the activists involved in the SRM campaign feel a particular solidarity with the global environmental movement, but they identify more strongly with the revolutionary, anti-capitalist branch of this movement.

Save Roșia Montană: Endangerment and nostalgia in Romania

The Save Roșia Montană campaign aims to stop Gabriel Resources, a Canadian mining firm, from opening Europe's largest opencast gold

mine near Roșia Montană, a group of 16 villages in Romania's Apuseni Mountains in the Western Carpathians. Roșia Montană's history as a mining settlement reaches back to pre-Roman times, and mining occurred here on and off for hundreds of years. In 1948, the mine was nationalized by the Romanian socialist state, and in 1970 opencast mining began, lasting until 2006 when the mine was closed (Alexandrescu 2011). The Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC), which formed when Gabriel Resources combined with the state firm Minvest Deva, has been trying since 1997 to re-open and expand the mine (Alexandrescu 2011), which would use cyanide leaching to extract gold and necessitate the creation of a large tailings facility, or cyanide lake, in a nearby valley (Szombati n.d.). Alburnus Maior, a local NGO, formed in 2000 in opposition to the mine. Activists headquartered in nearby regional center Cluj as well as Bucharest support the NGO, using protests to gain public support and collaborating with lawyers to make legal challenges against the RMGC. As in Moldova, activists have sought international funding and connections to the global environmental community, receiving financial support from various international environmental groups and help with campaign coordination from a Swiss activist (Alexandrescu 2011). These environmentalists focus not only on protecting the natural environment from destruction, but also on protecting villagers from being displaced from their homes. Many local residents have already moved or have agreed to move in exchange for compensation from RMGC, while others refuse to leave. Finally, the campaign aims to protect the pre-Roman mining galleries from destruction by attempting to have the site placed on the UNESCO heritage list, thus protecting it from mining indefinitely.

Ideology: corrupt state

In May 2012, I traveled to Cluj to carry out interviews with several activists involved in the SRM campaign. The campaign's basic view toward politics is that politicians are corrupt and dialogue with them is impossible. Simona, one of the movement's key proponents based in Cluj, echoed Violeta's views that trying to engage in politics is a waste of time.⁸ For example, trying to build a new political party, she told me during an interview, would be virtually impossible given the strength of political networks in Romania as well as their strong ties to industry. Furthermore, unsuccessful attempts to secure political support had proven to Simona and the other activists that politicians are untrustworthy. For instance, at one

point several campaign members had met with the Minister of Culture, who promised to support their UNESCO aspirations. However, he then refused to take the steps necessary to advance this project, prompting Simona to conclude that he had only made promises “to shut us up”. Corina, another activist who has designed artwork for the campaign, told me that she had some hope that the new government would support their campaign, but that she and the other activists knew all too well that politicians often make promises only to break them when they come to power. Indeed, while the new Prime Minister, Victor Ponta, initially expressed his opposition to the mine, his economic minister quickly expressed his support for the project (David 2012).

Activists expressed anger not only toward the Romanian government, but toward the EU and the RMGC as well. They feel that the EU has abandoned them, for although the European Parliament voted in 2010 to ban the use of cyanide in mining, the European Commission refused to enforce this. Movement participants also mentioned the RMGC’s close ties to Romanian politicians who have financial interests in the projects. For example, Simona told me that the RMGC had been giving money to political campaigns for ten years. I heard various stories from activists in Bucharest about the company’s control of the Romanian media, which is prevented from covering protests against the RMGC. During the general protests that erupted in Bucharest’s University Square in January 2012, the Roşia Montană protesters finally enjoyed some television coverage by integrating themselves with the other protesters; however, they found out later that the cameras had been instructed to cut away any time SRM protesters appeared in the shot.

The Save Roşia Montană campaign enjoys significant public support (Szombati n.d.), and it received a boost during the general protests against austerity measures and governmental corruption in Bucharest and across the country. As many others shared the SRM activists’ critical views about the EU and the strong ties between politics and industry, the general protesters quickly embraced the Save Roşia Montană campaign (Bucata 2012). The campaign’s aims also echoed many of the ideas being expressed by protesters related to democracy building, bringing down a corrupt government, and preventing the sale of Romania to international corporations. Finally, expressions of nationalism were common during the protests, with many people waving Romanian flags. The SRM campaign again fit in nicely, as Romanian flags appeared with the SRM logo in the center, suggesting that Roşia Montană “is” Romania, and thus to save one is to save the other.

Discourse: endangerment and anticipatory nostalgia

The campaign's views about the futility of engaging in politics and its aim to protect Roșia Montană from those who support the mining project, namely the Romanian government and the RMGC, lead the activists to use particular narratives. As mentioned above, the campaign stresses the importance of protecting not only nature, but also cultural heritage and the way of life of village residents. As a result, the narratives they use generally follow what Timothy Choy (2011) calls a politics of endangerment. Choy (2011: 26) argues that

as environmentalists grapple increasingly with the tight bonds that can be formed between people and places, between situated practices and specific landscapes, and between what are commonly glossed as culture and nature, discourses of endangerment have come to structure not only narrowly construed environmental politics, but also politics of cultural survival.

Endangerment here can be seen as an “anticipatory nostalgia” in which “the past is to be protected from the present, while the present is to be protected from the future; both are to be sheltered from the movement of history” (Choy 2011: 38). In Roșia Montană, activists want to protect the pre-Roman galleries, save the environment from destruction and ensure that the villagers can maintain their way of life. Anca, a young activist in Cluj, told me that the residents of Roșia Montană just want to be left alone to grow their own food and live a simple, peaceful life. Instead they live with constant uncertainty about the future, in which they may be forced to leave their villages. The endangerment discourse is also helpful in relation to displacement, as endangerment can be spatial in addition to being temporal. After all, nostalgia merely denotes “a kind of painful homesickness”; thus, “nostalgic discourses of endangerment do not simply bemoan the passage of time, but are sick, instead, from the loss of specific, meaningful spaces” (Choy 2011: 48-9). Activists appeal to Romanians’ sense of nostalgia by using narratives that focus on the connection of villagers to their land and the possibility that this connection will be broken by forced displacement.

It is important to realize that this endangerment is produced; that is, certain environments, places, and beings come to be seen as endangered through narratives. Moreover, despite the coherence of these narratives, not all actors see things the same way. While Romanian environmental activists stress the endangerment of a traditional way of life that involves

subsistence farming, Filip Alexandrescu (2011) argues that this narrative does not accurately reflect the lives of most villagers. Roșia Montană has always been a mining town, and many of its residents do not even have gardens, let alone consider themselves farmers. Nonetheless, the powerful image of a “traditional” way of life being threatened resonates with a more widespread uncertainty about Romania’s future. Indeed, Choy (2011: 49) argues further that “endangerment positions its subjects in the future, looking backward, watching with dismay at the ruining of our present. And because it proffers this clairvoyant view, it can engender politics - because with foresight, the future can be changed”. By casting Roșia Montană’s nature, people, and cultural heritage as endangered, the activists create powerful political tools, inspiring those who want to protect these things to protest against the RMGC and the politicians who support the mine.

Practice: protests and legal challenges

Following their ideological views about the impossibility of having a dialogue with politicians, the SRM campaign’s most visible actions are protests against the Romanian government, which has for the most part expressed support for the mine. When I visited Cluj, the campaign held a small demonstration in front of the Continental Hotel to commemorate six months since they had occupied the hotel. After the demonstration, Simona and a couple of other activists told me the story of “Occupy Conti”, which they had staged to bring attention to the Roșia Montană issue. After months of planning, early one November morning in 2011 six activists broke into the abandoned hotel. Once inside, they unfurled banners, played loud music, and led chants with the help of a growing crowd outside. Local law enforcement was alerted to the occupation, and after several hours the activists were forced out. However, due to the large crowd that gathered, the support displayed by passersby, and the buzz the event created, they considered the occupation a success. As mentioned above, the SRM campaign also participated in the protests in Bucharest in January 2012, and they held their own protest on a bitterly cold day that same winter in front of the parliament building, even bussing in activists and local residents from Roșia Montană.

While protests are the most visible form of action taken by the SRM campaign, Simona told me that in fact most of their time and energy goes into “access to justice” work, or bringing court cases against the RMGC. They have several lawyers, some working pro bono, who work to prove

that the company is in violation of regulations or that certain permits are null and void, for example (Wolf-Murray 2012). These activities in the courtroom may not be as exciting or attention grabbing as the protests, whose main purpose is to maintain public support for the campaign, but they have kept the mining project at a stalemate for over a decade.

In sum, the Save Roșia Montană campaign views the government as a corrupt body that is selling Roșia Montană to a foreign company. Activists' most visible approach is to protest the project, demanding that the government stop it. They use narratives of endangerment, portraying Roșia Montană as a place whose environment, people, and history must be protected, especially because of their national importance. They use these narratives to gain public support and to argue for the designation of Roșia Montană as a UNESCO heritage site. However, their more active, less visible approach is to seek justice through the court system, tying the project up in legal red tape to delay it until a permanent stop, such as a UNESCO designation, can be obtained.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that despite some similarities, the environmental communities in Moldova and Romania have emerged in distinct ways. Factors contributing to these contrasts include funding availability from the private and public sectors, relationships to the European Union, and different environmental histories. An examination of two groups of environmental activists, Green Moldova and the Save Roșia Montană campaign, illustrates how divergent contexts can give rise to very different approaches. While both groups express an aversion to political engagement, the activists in Moldova ultimately worked with the Ministry of Environment and envision a future in which they can actively participate in politics, while the Romanian activists maintained a commitment to fighting the government, participating in protests, and making legal challenges against the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation. Moreover, the Moldovan activists have in some ways embraced a neoliberal, ecological modernization paradigm, which they feel can benefit both the environment and the economy, while in Romania the Save Roșia Montană activists represent part of a growing segment of the population willing to speak out against a neoliberal capitalist system that they view as threatening their environment and their people.

NOTES

- ¹ After the fall of communism, Western aid organizations filtered much of their funding to such organizations, which they saw as essential to the growth of “civil society” and thus the promotion of democracy in the region (Mandel 2002, Verdery 1996, Wedel 2001). NGOs multiplied rapidly during this period, and although many have since disappeared, Western donors continue to target such groups.
- ² However, such an arrangement also means that the NGO is farther away from the people and places it protects (Cellarius 2004).
- ³ The activists I talked to expressed some discomfort about receiving corporate money; one group compromised by refusing to take money from cigarette companies.
- ⁴ For a wider discussion of post-accession conditionality, see Sedelmeier (2008) and Trauner (2009).
- ⁵ Various anthropologists have documented the ways that local communities and local knowledge can transform development projects (e.g. Arce and Long 2000, Crewe and Harrison 1998, Lewis and Mosse 2006).
- ⁶ All of the names in this paper are pseudonyms.
- ⁷ This perception is not surprising, since Moldova is listed at 66th on the 2011 Failed States Index, falling into the second-worst category, “in danger” (Foreign Policy 2012).
- ⁸ These views about politics evoke the complaints of activists who have participated in recent protests worldwide (e.g. Juris 2012, Collins 2012). One common thread tying these protests together involves protesters’ frustrations related to a lack of political representation, leading to calls for “real” democracy (Butler 2011, Hardt and Negri 2011, Nugent 2012).

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