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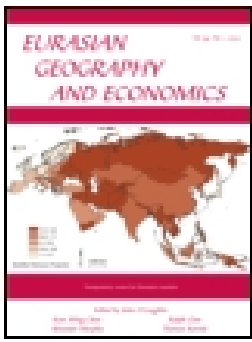
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# Contesting post-communist economic development: gold extraction, local community, and rural decline in Romania

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## ABSTRACT

Plans to open a globally significant gold mine at Roșia Montană, in the Transylvanian region of Romania, have led to decades of controversy and struggle. This paper explores different understandings of extraction amongst advocates for and opponents of the mine over the last two decades. We discuss the shifting roles of capital, the state, civil society organizations, and the local community over time, arguing for the need to distinguish between their different positions on mining. In particular, we contend that the understanding of extraction promoted by the owners of the mine, and by the local community, is fundamentally different in terms of cultural, social, and economic priorities. The local community argue for a traditional type of mining, embedded in local ownership and established labor identities, whereas the neo-liberal vision of capital for the Roșia Montană site is that of a globally competitive, technologically advanced form of extraction. In uncovering and developing these hermeneutic differences, the paper reveals that pro-traditional development attitudes among economically marginalized groups are not necessarily attuned to the material global interconnections shaping neoliberal capitalism.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Extraction; activism; Roșia Montană; depopulation; civil society; community; mining

## Introduction

The fall of the socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe led to the reshaping of political and economic systems across the region, accompanied by considerable social and political upheaval (Elster, Offe, and Preuss 1998). New civil society organizations emerged to challenge state decision-making, and one area of particular contention has been that around the extraction of natural resources, and its environmental consequences. Domestic and international groups focused on environmental campaigning have begun to challenge the manner in which states are grappling with the pollution caused by a legacy of extractive industry, while transitioning to a more capitalist economy, which often involves an intensification of natural resource exploitation (Velicu 2019).

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Yet the role and attitudes of local communities in these struggles is often ignored, even though these are often the people who are most directly impacted by extraction and environmental degradation (Iorio and Corsale 2010). Internationally, civil society opponents of mining (Conde 2017), forestry (O'Brien 2019), and gas extraction (Walton, Williams, and Leonard 2017), make robust claims regarding the negative impacts of extractive practices on both society and the natural environment, yet recent research also suggests that there can be considerable local support for extractive industries, resulting from a perception of its social and economic benefits (Walton 2007; Cabrejas 2012; Lewin 2019; Kojola 2020).

This paper explores the relationship between the state, civil society, local communities, and capital in post-socialist Romania, focusing on an investigation of changing attitudes toward the extraction of natural resources in one community. The case that we have chosen is that of Roșia Montană in Romania, where controversy has raged over plans to open a large-scale gold mine. Our approach seeks to move beyond a straightforward definition of extraction, to look at this concept conceptually and relationally, studying the different ways in which it is understood by different agents, and the relationship those understandings posit between the local and the global. As Dietz and Engels (2017, 6) have persuasively argued, extractivism must be understood in terms of broad networks that run across scales, meaning it

is not limited to a specific scale or place (the mine, the plantation, the nation state, the global South, the global market, etc.) . . . extractivism is characterized by "overlapping territorialities" that transcend the nation state, link the global and the local, and are produced and contested by a variety of state and non-state actors.

Arboleda (2020) argues that this means looking beyond the physical infrastructure of, for example, mine shafts and pits, to a wider nexus of extractive relations behind resource-based industries in late capitalism, including the financial, legal, and labor aspects of uneven geographical development.

Our contribution to the existing extraction literature is twofold. Firstly, we seek to open up a hermeneutics of extraction, studying the different ways in which this key concept is understood by capital, civil society actors, the state, and especially the local community. Like other scholars in the field, we seek to include within our conceptualization forms of resistance to extractive practices (Arboleda 2020; Engels and Dietz 2017; Martinez-Alier and Walter 2016; Velicu 2012a, 2012b). However, whereas previous studies have tended to focus on the conflict between states and civil society organizations (Alexandrescu 2013; O'Brien 2009; Velicu 2012a; Velicu and Kaika 2017; Vesalon and Crețan 2012), our methodology seeks to distinguish both from the attitudes of the local community around the Roșia Montană mine, allowing the voices of local people to emerge as an entity in their own right.

Secondly, we adopt a diachronic and scalar approach, which investigates shifts in the meaning of extraction in the local community over time, as a way of understanding how debates have shifted in response to long-, medium- and short-term socio-economic change. We therefore argue that there are significant shifts in the way that extraction is framed and understood across the decades since the socialist era, by comparing our team's recent interviews with the local population (conducted 2018–2019) with those of previous researchers (e.g. Velicu 2012a, 2012b; Alexandrescu, 2013, 2020). We believe that this approach sheds useful light not only on the different logics of extraction across different political and economic regimes, but also on the longer-term processes that are in play, especially changes in the relationships that underpin extraction. It allows us to trace the material as well as the discursive changes that have resulted from the shift away from the economic autarchy of the socialist era to the intensified, technologically-enabled resource exploitation of the capitalist era. This then allows us to explore the ways that these shifting relations have affected the relative alignments of capital, the state, civil society organizations, and the local community in relation to extractive practices (Horowitz 2011b).

Our sense of these four actors is therefore not as agents with fixed interest positions; instead, we argue that they are subject to a series of fleeting and unstable alliances that are liable to change with shifts in wider understandings of extractive practice. In particular, we will suggest that there are significant tensions between an older conceptualization of extraction as a socially embedded, locally beneficial entity, providing employment, infrastructure, social opportunities, and encouraging in-migration, and an alternative framing, in which it is understood as a sink for international global capital, and the cause of local community displacement and social and environmental degradation. We will argue that apparent support for mining in the local community is not utilizing the same conceptualization of extraction as the capitalist owners of the mine, but that it is instead grounded in an older understanding of mining traditions that are severely at odds with the material realities of contemporary large-scale extraction.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the theoretical background of the paper, with a particular focus on the contested character of resource extraction. The second presents the methodology used. The third section outlines a diachronic perspective on the Roşia Montană area including the shifting role of stakeholders around the proposal of the mine project, before a final section compares attitudes of the local community to those of the state, civil society actors, and capital across time.

### **Contested resource extraction, community and depopulation**

Extractivism has emerged globally as an economic and political strategy, representing a “growth-orientated development pathway based on rent-seeking

activities, that is, the large-scale exploitation, production and exportation of raw materials". (Dietz and Engels 2017, 2). The parameters of the state-industry-community relationship are context-dependent and can take geographically and culturally variable forms (Ballard and Banks 2003), leading to sharply divergent community responses (Horowitz 2011a), and the remaking of places (and their historical meanings) in a variety of ways which could modify modes of social organization and living (Bebbington and Bebbington 2018). Therefore, the state's new dependence on the extractive industry for growth and revenue thus reshaped "societal and institutional norms and state-society relations in general" (Dietz and Engels 2017, 3). As Conde and Le Billon (2017, 691) note, this means that the state's role cannot simply be restricted to the regulatory, since it also acts as "custodian (and de facto owner) of subterranean resources, as an attractor of investment for resource extraction ... as well as decision-maker, facilitator, and enforcer of regulatory processes".

Nonetheless, it is important to retain a sense that there are underlying parallels between many of these particular cases. Jonas Wolff (2017) identifies "contested extractivism" as any form of resource extraction that is challenged by different stakeholders. Wolff argues for the need for a nuanced understanding of the object and scale of these disputes, while also pointing to importance of recognizing the similarities between cases, in order to uncover underlying global trends and processes. On the other hand, the spatial nature of contested extractivism, across various scales: place, territory, scale, networks (see also Jessop, Brenner, and Jones 2008; Harvey 2001; Lefebvre 1991) is also relevant. Adding a spatial dimension to the analysis can enable an approach that is both aware of cultural specificities, and able to develop a relational and global sense of place (Massey 1991) through a systemic understanding of the nature of extraction in a global world, revealing "how and with what effects social relations, interactions and strategies of contentious politics are mediated, produced, perpetuated and altered" (Dietz and Engels 2017, 5–6). Methodologically, then, it is necessary to adopt an approach that understands both:

global political-economic processes of transformation [and] ... the interplay of these processes with specific social, political and economic factors such as formal and informal institutions governing rights to access and usage, power relations at and between different scales, and actor constellations.

Such an approach is almost inevitably diachronic, since actors, relations and institutions develop over time, and relations between them shift with wider change, meaning that they reflect "different histories, but also different material conditions." (Dietz and Engels 2017, 4).

As Brown and Argent (2016, 135) argue, this also applies to local communities, who are "embedded in global as well as national systems", in a series of relations that change with time. Mine sites are often located in geographically

and economically marginal areas, where communities may already be struggling to maintain viability. The entry of industry can lead to “further spatialization and peripheralization” (Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012, 77), reinforcing regional social and economic disparities. Yet by virtue of these vulnerabilities, such communities are often poorly placed to exercise agency over their own future. Nonetheless, resource extraction has the potential to generate considerable tension and opposition within local communities, particularly around issues of the “socio-environmental impacts on land, water and livelihoods coupled with the lack of participation of local communities ... in decision-making processes” (Conde 2017, 81). Extraction can be an opportunity for “previously unthought of, ignored, and excluded interests” to assert themselves (Argent 2011, 183). Yet there are dangers in assuming that such communities are homogeneous in their stance, as Conde and Le Billon (2017, 685–6) argue:

divisions and conflicts between community members are common, notably between members relying more heavily on their land and resources (e.g. women), compared to those who might want to benefit from the mine through jobs or associated development projects.

The interaction between local communities and civil society actors, such as environmental groups, operating at international, national, and regional levels, can be complex. Some communities strongly support extraction, while others strongly resist. As Conde and Le Billon note (2017, 686), “places are not simply ‘material locations’ but relational spaces embedded with cultural meanings and emotional significance derived from historical and everyday relations between local people and the land”. Different histories, economic positions, and values can lead to radical differences in perceptions of what is locally acceptable.

Claims made in support of mining are shaped by the specific context in which they occur, but certain common features can be identified: perceived economic benefits (Cabrejas 2012); reinforcement of historically sedimented community identity (Kojola 2019; Lewin 2019); and fears about the potential costs of moving away from established practices (Roche and Argent 2015). Examining community support for a goldmine on the West Coast of New Zealand, Walton (2007) identified four claims: a sense of “being kicked in the teeth, a feeling of solidarity, sustaining of jobs and communities, and responsible conservation”. Together these claims point to a sense of shared ownership in natural resources, and a need to protect community interests in the face of neglect, emphasizing confidence in local stewardship and a willingness to mobilize to prevent change (see also Klandermans et al. 2002). This sense of community under threat from outside forces is also captured in Lewin’s (2019) examination of Appalachia, where people feel neglected and devalued by the state, resulting in a situation where attempts to restrict or prevent mining tend to be viewed as a challenge to the community. Kojola (2020, 674) uncovered similar sentiments in Minnesota, where local support for extraction represented “a form of justice

protecting their rural mining and working-class way of life". Faced with the potential loss of economic opportunities and the implication that they are not capable, local communities can resent civil society actors as outsiders. This can lead to situations where environmentalists are seen as "culprits of the socio-economic decline" who "must either be expelled or 'converted' into 'allies' of mining" (Cabrejas 2012, 420). Opposition to extraction can thus amplify existing social divisions and solidarities within the community.

The willingness of peripheral communities to tolerate and embrace resource extraction rests on several factors. One of the most significant in many places is demographic change, especially the specter of depopulation, as Pinilla, Ayuda and Sáez (2008, 2) argue:

it may unquestionably be regarded as the most severe threat to local economies, not only because it limits the growth opportunities, causes important environmental problems and complicates the provision of public services, but because it may jeopardize the very existence of small towns and villages as inhabited settlements.

Additionally, depopulation can lead to demographic shifts, as older people are more likely to stay, while younger, more mobile residents relocate (Rizzo 2016). Though in many places "attachment ... to the countryside remains strong and seems to be one of the factors holding people there" (Bell et al. 2009, 322), the effect may not be uniform across the generations: in some places, younger residents are less influenced by "political traditions, historical conditions, former paths of economic development, and political frameworks" (Ehrlich, Kriszan, and Lang 2012, 79). Marginalization can lead to stigmatization, dissuading incomers from settling, and preventing former members of the community from returning. As Mladenov and Ilieva (2012, 99) argue, in the simplest sense "Depopulation is the visible synthesized display of ... demographic crisis". It can lead to the loss and collapse of local services, unless additional state help is provided, meaning that the state, too, has an interest in preventing it as do Carmo (2010, 18) argues that:

public institutions ... [are required to] take the responsibility for organizing and implementing political measures and getting their local representatives in these communities to take an active role in putting community projects into action.

However, as Pinilla, Ayuda and Sáez (2008) argue, where depopulation is an outcome of modern forms of economic development (urbanization, the decline of rural industry), piecemeal efforts to reverse it are unlikely to be successful and may lead to long-term harms.

Together this suggests that contested extraction needs to be analyzed in a manner that recognizes its cultural, geographical, and historical specificity in different contexts, though with an eye to both the nexus of international relations that it involves, and to similar processes happening elsewhere. The proposals to transform Roșia Montană in Romania into a "planetary mine"



(Arboleda 2020) thus need to be considered in terms of the temporally shifting understandings of extraction promoted by capital, the state, the local community and civil society, as these have evolved over the last two decades and a half. To achieve this in the analysis that follows, we will track changes to the concepts of resource extraction through recent Romanian history to fully assess the character of opposition to the Roşia Montană project.

## **Methodology**

The research presented in this article draws on a mixed methods approach based on two stages: an analysis of primary sources and existing secondary literature; and interpretation of a series of interviews with residents and workers in Roşia Montană.

### ***Primary and secondary sources***

To inform the interview questions and develop a comprehensive picture of the situation in Roşia Montană, we made use of a range of primary sources and existing secondary literature, including local and national policy papers on the Roşia Montană project produced from 2002 to 2018, which provided an outline of the project's formal, institutional management. We also examined the background, campaigns, and outcome of the 2012 local referendum on the mine project (Unirea 2012), and representations of the mine in the media from 2012–2015 (using the media platforms *Hotnews.com* and *Mediafax.ro* as well as local newspapers *Apulum* and *Unirea*, both of which are based in Alba Iulia, the capital of Alba County, where Roşia Montană is also located. Moreover, we use critical insights from previous studies (Alexandrescu 2013; Velicu 2012a, 2012b; Alexandrescu 2020) in order to see whereas the period 2000 to 2010 echoed a similar narrative of local population on extraction or if local narratives have changed.

### ***Open-ended interviews***

We developed a set of semi-structured interview questions for local residents and workers at Roşia Montană. The first author used an existing contact in the community to recruit potential participants with a snowball sampling approach (four initial families, who suggested friends, relatives and neighbors). A total of 28 people were approached for interview; 11 agreed to participate (Appendix). All interviews were conducted in Romanian in person by the first author between December 2018 and January 2019. The interview schedule consisted of 15 questions. Questions included issues of how participants saw the impact of RMGC in the area, if they participated in the local protests, and their opinion on the socio-economic situation in the area. An important issue was the final

question, which we intended to determine whether participants were pro-traditional development (including pro-mining) or pro-alternative development (anti-mining). Oral interviews lasted between five and a half minutes and 19 minutes; written interviews took between 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Six interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, while the interviewer took notes in the remaining five and wrote them up afterward. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research at the time of recruitment and signed a consent form agreeing to their participation on this basis. Reflecting on the rate of refusal and the relative brevity of the interviews, we would suggest that significant academic and media interest in the RMGC project has led to a sense of fatigue and wariness among local residents: as Neal et al. (2015, 494) comment, “repeated attention results in participants literally getting tired of answering similar questions from successive cohorts of researchers”. It may also reflect perceived familiarity with the context as well as frustration with the uncertainty over the mine’s future. Despite this, we believe that a small number of interviews, correlated with other sources, may be “sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations” (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006, 78).

The audio recordings and written interviews were transcribed in Romanian and transcripts were then translated into English. We adopted a thematic analysis of the data (Bryman 2016) identifying initial patterns and recurring ideas, and then constructing and reviewing a set of codes, which included support for the mining project; local control and ownership; complicated legacies from the communist period; external actors buying support within the community; depopulation; and alternative development (e.g. tourism).

### **Contested extraction at Roșia Montană: a diachronic perspective**

Romania has a long history of mining, giving it a “traditional” status in parts of the country. The collapse of mining as a state-run industry allowed the entry of global forms of capital into this sector of the Romanian economy. However, the state remains a key, though shifting, actor in the exploitation and management of natural resources. The population of the Apuseni mountains around Roșia Montană has been dependent on extraction for many decades (Matley 1971), and the highly centralized communist regime broadly ensured that mining work was well-remunerated and secure, enabling it to act as an attractor for in-migrants from other regions of Romania. However, as an older mine (active under the communist regime) Roșia Montană is inferior in size, productivity, and environmental impacts when compared to contemporary large-scale mines. Furthermore, the logic of extraction was radically different under the planned economy of the socialist system, where economic autarchy and full employment were the goals, rather than the maximization of profit.

The transition to a capitalist society has significantly adjusted the relationship between capital, the state, the local community and civil society organizations. Capital investment has intensified and technologized extraction, while links to local employment and community development have weakened. During the 1990s, many mines closed after the loss of state support made them uneconomic, and regional state companies such as MINVEST Deva were no longer financed with public money, but were gradually closed in a less-favored areas program. Miners were offered compensation salaries just to become unemployed, and many decided to retire and to migrate to their native regions of Romania. The state could not support investment in new mining technologies, and initially struggled to attract international investors to redevelop mining infrastructure. As mining areas suffered, local and national politicians began to campaign with promises to attract foreign capital, and secured some success: the Roșia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC) was created in 1997 as part of this wave of investment. A joint venture between MINVEST and Canadian mining company Gabriel Resources aimed to develop a modern mine to exploit gold resources over a 25-year period (see RMGC 2013a). On this basis, and with “tacit” support from local mayors and small mining syndicates, the company was granted a concession to mine at Roșia Montană in 1999.

The social, political, and economic dynamics of mining at Roșia Montană have undergone several shifts during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Between 2000 and 2010, RMGC took steps to begin the commercial extraction of gold deposits and to expand mining in the area. To support this aim, the company undertook public consultations, feasibility studies, and archeological studies to demonstrate viability and assure the local population of its intentions (RMGC 2013a, 2013b). As we mentioned above, the local state was not a passive and neutral arbiter of this process, but enthusiastically supported the company’s plans, citing economic growth, job creation, and a brake on depopulation in its arguments. Revenue was a significant additional inducement for both the local and national state: in addition to the promised 5.3 USD billion (US\$) that the Romanian state would earn from the mine, RMGC had also claimed to have invested around 1.5 USD million in the local economy, including a mining museum, a water treatment plant, the transformation of the Town Hall into a hotel and redevelopment of vacant local homes into tourist boarding houses (see Vesalon and Crețan, 2013, 2013).

From the outset, the project was deeply controversial, with protests for and against development. Local community organizations in favor of mining organized themselves to express their support for the Roșia Montană project, particularly during Parliamentary discussions in the late 2000s and in the early 2010s. A group of several non-governmental organizations, public institutions, and people from various fields of activity got involved in pro-mining activism; the list of NGOs was diverse, their mission being to protect miners in the Apuseni Mountains, and included the Pro Roșia Montană Association, the

Patronal Mining Association (Patromin), the Nordic Organization 2008, the Leaders Foundation of Campeni, the Apuseni Employers' Association (Abrud), the Auraria Foundation Brad, Pro Justice, and the Environmental Partnership Association of Roșia Montană. Moreover, a local referendum, organized by the County Council of Alba, was held to demonstrate local support for the mine on December 9 2012 (Unirea 2012). A total of 52% of voters indicated support for the project, but the result was deemed invalid by the Electoral District Office of Alba County, as turnout did not reach the required participant threshold (50% of the total voters). Of a total eligible electorate of 72,490 voters, only 31,319 cast a vote, around 43% (Unirea 2012). Despite the result being set aside, the referendum publicly demonstrated some degree of support for the project and its proposed benefits amongst the local community.

These more formal groupings and events were complemented by localized pro-mining mobilization, particularly in autumn 2013. These peaked during a visit to the area of the Catalina mine by a delegation of members from the Romanian Parliament. Hundreds of local protesters dressed in miners' work suits, wearing ear muffs, and carrying lit lamps, chanted "We want mining", "Romania, don't forget, mining is your chance", "We want to work, not to beg", and "Waiting was enough for us" (Ziare.com 2013a). The protests were organized by the Future of Mining trade union and several local pro-mining NGOs (Ziare.com 2013a). Other pro-mining meetings were held in Campeni, Abrud, and Alba-Iulia in late 2013. For instance, the protest in Alba-Iulia (3 September 2013) was led by the "Future of Mining" trade union, and saw 100 participants turn up in front of the Alba county council building, chanting "We are Roșia Montană", "Mining is our bread", "We fight for our jobs", "Our mountains are wearing gold, but we are begging from door to door". These groups advertised themselves as "true" representatives of local culture, arguing that they were "the true Roșia Montană, not the ones who come from who knows where to gather in Bucharest's University Square" (Alba24.ro 2013).

As this might suggest, there has also been a long-standing movement in opposition to the development of the Roșia Montană project (Jarosz 2015). These protests were themselves the result of a historical shift: the opening of politics to a more democratic form created space for contention, as civil society groups began to form and challenge the state. Beginning in around 2000, environmental groups mobilized supporters around the country to block the neoliberal gold-mining development at Roșia Montană (Vesalon and Crețan 2012). The high-profile international character of the dispute meant that the struggle over the proposed mine was conducted largely above the level of the affected community, whose voices were often lost in the struggles that ensued. Protests against open-pit mining at the site began in the early 2000s with the "Save Roșia Montană" campaign, led by *Alburnus Maior*. Parau (2009, 129) notes that it consisted of:

a few farmers and mining engineers . . . motivated by the company's precipitate buy-up of local properties before securing the necessary permits. Lacking political experience and resources, Alburnus did little more than write letters of complaint to Romanian authorities which returned no answers, or perfunctory ones.

However, the campaign gained the support of international organizations such as Greenpeace, CEE BankWatch, and MiningWatch Canada, attracting a great deal of media attention. This brought resources, notably legal and financial support, to challenge the actions of the state (Parau 2009). The growing interest of the EU in Romania's domestic operations in the lead-up to accession in 2007 also meant that it was able to exert leverage at a high level. Protesters claimed the RMGC project was not sustainable and threatened the livelihood and physical environment of local communities. By focusing on issues of environmental justice, the campaign attempted to foreground local concerns around potential impacts (see Velicu 2019; Velicu and Kaika 2017). These campaigners claimed that the pro-mining lobby was financed by RMGC with the support of local councilors and mayors in Roșia Montană, Abrud, and Campeni (Ziare.com 2013a).

Ultimately, politicians hesitated in the face of such opposition. In 2007 the central state halted the process of approval for the mine. In 2013, President Traian Băsescu advocated for the withdrawal of the project from the Parliament, stating “[t]he solution is to withdraw the project as a matter of urgency, because the risk is creating maximum social tension, as long as the project is before the Parliament” (Hotnews.ro 2013). Prime Minister Victor Ponta, however, responded that it would be a disaster for the country if the President rejected the RMGC project, because of the wider message it would send about openness to global capital. At the Eastern European Investment Summit, organized by Reuters, Ponta asserted (Mediafax.ro 2013) that:

if the Parliament decides not to do this project, it will not be a big problem (economically speaking), but, if Romania offers the message that we are against foreign investors exploiting our potential, this would be a disaster for Romania.

These developments demonstrated the tension between the desire to maintain a stable business environment for foreign direct investment, while also addressing significant levels of concern raised by local and national populations.

Tensions were also visible at the local government level in the Roșia Montană community. The Mayor of the nearby village of Câmpeni, Andres Ioan Călin, supported the RMGC project (Apulum 2013), stating:

At the beginning, I was reluctant about the investor's proposals for Roșia Montană. But . . . I have seen for myself how the technology proposed by RMGC is used, they use modern technology and have brought prosperity to the communities in which they operate, creating the necessary jobs . . . We want to offer people in the communities we represent a good life, truly European living conditions and the chance to stay with their families, rather than going abroad to earn their daily bread.

This position illustrates the willingness of local politicians to fight for the preservation of jobs in the mining sector, as a way of maintaining support from the local electorate. Similarly, Eugen Furdui, mayor of Roșia Montană in 2013, was also in favor of the RMGC project (Ziare.com 2013b), arguing:

this investment brings thousands of direct and indirect jobs ... Pollution will not be created with modern technology, and anyway there is already pollution at Roșia Montană, it's not for one day but for decades. Third problem - patrimony and tourism: we will be able to travel, we will restore the Roșia Montană heritage with money we have from investors.

As with Călin, Furdui attempted to create an idea of a future in which the RMGC project would support and underpin renewal of a region that had suffered during the post-communist period.

Both pro- and anti-mining protests peaked between September 2013 and February 2014, as part of the “Romanian Autumn” (see Mărgărit 2016). This broader wave of protest addressed issues of government mismanagement after the 2011 economic crisis, and Roșia Montană was increasingly used as an illustration of poor governance in the country. Considering the nature of these protests, Diana Mărgărit (2016, 48) has argued that they were able to leverage wider perceptions of an alliance between an incompetent and corrupt state, a self-interested political class, and a wealthy corporation following its own interests in resource exploitation, noting that:

a particular mix of domestic factors have been decisive in “the Romanian autumn” protests: (a) the political support for the mining project in Roșia Montană; (b) the political tensions which affected the credibility of state authorities; and (c) the campaign conducted by RMGC, mainstream media, and national political authorities in favor of the exploitation in Roșia Montană.

Largely because of the Romanian Autumn, the Romanian Parliament voted against the Roșia Montană project in 2014. In early 2017, the Romanian Ministry of Culture proposed Roșia Montană for inscription as a World Heritage site, but ultimately failed in the face of opposition (Dawson 2017). Together, these actions demonstrate the contested character of the RMGC project, involving both members of the local community and participants further removed.

This historically grounded analysis of the controversy around the Roșia Montană mine reveals that the relationship between capital, the state, the local community, and civil society organizations shifts over time, in response both to long-term socio-economic shifts and medium- and shorter-term pressures (Alexandrescu 2013, 2020). The way that resource extraction is conceptualized also changes at various scales of time, with significant alterations observable even over a relatively short timeframe (1990–2014). In the next section, we will argue that there is a cultural aspect to these fights, with supporters of mining defending a traditional identity, way of life, and sense of

community, while opponents portray the mine as the outworking of a faceless global capitalism that will ultimately damage both the local environment and social relations. International critical perspectives on extractivism (Martinez-Alier and Walter 2016; Engels and Dietz 2017) discuss similar effects in other parts of the world, where the future of small, inefficient, older mines hangs in the balance. These mines are unable to compete in a contemporary capitalist structure where resource extraction has been intensified and technologized, and where a logic of profit maximization rather than economic autarchy prevails. Local communities find themselves stuck in the gears of this change, wanting to defend not only jobs, but the economic and social viability of place from obsolescence, yet concerned about the deleterious environmental and social effects of large-scale mining.

### **Current community perspectives on Roșia Montană**

Contention over the Roșia Montană project has been an important feature of the community's experience for a considerable period. It has also placed the community in a wider network of actors, as supporters and opponents of the project argue over the costs and benefits of an expanded mine, with the future still uncertain. We witnessed frustration at this impasse amongst some of our interviewees: a former guard at the mine (Ro3) argued that it was "very important to restart activity at Roșia Montană, of course it would have a very important impact for the family and for all the inhabitants". The loss of work resulting from the stalled development is a significant issue for the community, as without jobs, people have no reason to remain in the village. The financial stability of families, and the viability of the wider community, are under threat. Similar to the findings of Cabrejas (2012), Kojola (2020) and Walton (2007), community support for mining is driven very much by its potential to help sustain a way of life.

As this might suggest, there was some support for development based on identity and traditions amongst the interviewees, with many focusing on the economic benefits for a marginalized community. Eight out of the 11 people to whom we spoke believed that the future of their locale was tied to traditional forms of mining development. Yet the position was nuanced: support was not unconditional, and considerations of local control and ownership were raised as an important requirement. This was illustrated by a teacher (Ro1), who argued:

The gold should be exploited wisely, but by the locals, on a legal basis, as it is in the case of wood, with old methods and locals to have priority.

The form of extraction therefore mattered: locals were not arguing for intensive capitalist extraction, but for a locally owned process, in accordance with the norms and values of the community. This suggestive contribution indicates the

ways in which land has a meaning to the community: ownership of the process matters, as do the methods used (Conde and Le Billon 2017). This idea of traditional mining was shared with other interviewees, with one of them (Ro 10) arguing:

cyanide was used to exploit it and, you know how it was during Ceaușescu's time, with a shovel and ... there were no procedures, and yet people were careful and nothing bad happened. So, there are no other procedures known yet, just through mercury or cyanide.

This demonstrates the complicated legacy of the past: old mining techniques, used in the communist period, were advocated for in contrast to modern extraction techniques. There is a clear division between this type of pro-mining attitude and the technologized, intensified type of extraction that is typical of large-scale mines under capitalist control.

The social benefits of the mining project were emphasized in the interviews in ways that reflected the post-communist context. The quote above noting the need for "a legal basis" points to the potential for corruption in a country where contention against corruption has given much importance in the last decade (Crețan and O'Brien 2020), mainly when it is manifested on the ground of weak governance and limited capacity for enforcement (Mărgărit 2016). Changes in the wider socio-political context also shaped attitudes, particularly in relation to the threat of depopulation. This is clearly a challenge for the village of Roșia Montană, as the population has fallen from 3,808 persons in 1992 to about 2,355 by 2018 (Romanian Census 1992, 2002, 2011; Roșia Montană Townhall 2018). Addressing this concern, a municipal employee (Ro8) argued "It is important [to exploit the mine], as our children would not be working abroad anymore. Yes, I am worried because people don't have anywhere to work." Similarly, a school cleaner (Ro5) argued:

The impact [of limited employment opportunities] is critical, there are no people living here anymore. If you want to come from Abrud to Roșia you don't find a car, you wait for hours if you don't have your own car ... there are no people on the streets; after 8 pm you don't hear anyone on the streets. In the past one could find many children, people on the streets ... there were very many, even this school was full with children, now there aren't ... so many as they were before in one class.

Accelerating depopulation, and a hollowing out of communities, was therefore a pressing concern. Resettlement of local residents by the RMGC to the Recea area in Alba-Iulia was a major factor behind depopulation, which has resulted in the loss of young people from the community. The impact of resettlement on local populations to enable the construction of mega-projects can have long-term intergenerational effects, as evidenced by the Iron Gates (Văran and Crețan 2018).

Perhaps surprisingly, opponents of the mine also grounded their arguments in the preservation of the community. On the few occasions when



environmental concerns were voiced by interviewees, their worries related to the risks for those dwelling locally. This position is exemplified by a participant (Ro7) who argued that the project “would destroy everything, it would destroy the vegetation ... the commune, we couldn’t live here”. Extraction here emerges as a threat to the community and to a more traditional way of life: opponents and supporters of the mine share a sense of an established cultural and labor identity under threat. In some cases, this turned into an argument for the entire area to become a museum for tourists, drawing on the attempt to get the area listed as a World Heritage site. As a local entrepreneur (Ro6) argued:

we can harness what mining did for thousands of years until now ... from the historical point of view so that Roşia Montană will be included in the UNESCO heritage, to be visited by tourists and to have what to show them, how the exploitation was done. There are works from Antiquity and up to the Modern Age.

While this is a radically different solution from that of an expanded mine, the central concern is similar: to maintain local control and viability, drawing on the resource and enabling the community to decide what is best. This echoes Cabrejas’ (2012) analysis, in that there is a sense of resistance to outside actors determining the future of place.

Protests and actions in favor of the mine should be viewed in this context, as an attempt to safeguard economic opportunities, while at the same time ensuring local ownership and community persistence. Self-interest may also have been an element: discussing the protests, a teacher (Ro11) noted “The promoting protests were attended by people from the commune, the employees and others that wanted a job and hoped that, if we protest, we will be hired”. The strong emphasis on local identity, traditions, and ownership also led to a perception that those from outside (both for and against the project) were interfering where they were not welcome. A former RMGC employee (Ro1) noted that this made those who were arguing for the mine vulnerable to exploitation by capital, which took material form through the RMGC project, whose plans for the mine were more intensely extractive, and less open to local control:

The NGOs that were pro consisted of members from the company, and those against had patriotic feeling and healthier principles, but, in time, they were conquered by the benefits ... Many employees of RMGC were manipulated.

Another interviewee (Ro5) noted the apparently artificial character of the protests, stating “One Sunday, all the traffic was blocked. There were buses and coaches, people were brought here and paid to come from other areas”. These arguments raise important questions about the role of external actors, pointing to attempts by capital to circumvent or exclude meaningful engagement with the community (see Özen and Özen 2011; Kojola and Lequieu 2020). It is important, therefore, to separate the position of the mining company from

that of local communities, since there are important tensions between both positions, with very different understandings of extraction in play.

The extent to which RMGC or other external actors paid activists to participate in the pro-mining protests is difficult to determine objectively. It is possible, however, to evidence the claim that the RMGC made direct attempts to shape the community and its attitudes. This is clear in the creation of Recea, a neighborhood in the nearby town of Alba Iulia. It was created to house around 150 residents of Roșia Montană who were relocated in order to allow mining to start in 2008–09 (RMGC 2013a, 2013b). A further site, Piatra Albă (or Roșia Montană Nouă), situated at the edge of Roșia Montană, was designated for the relocation of 25 families (Vesalon and Crețan 2012, 67), but uncertainty over the mine's future meant that this never happened. These relocations amplified divisions in the community, fragmenting attitudes toward the mine in accordance with the housing situation of different groups, as one participant (Ro5) noted:

they divided the commune in two. Some were against, because they didn't want to leave the village, others were excited to leave it because they had older, small houses and they moved to Recea [neighborhood in Alba Iulia] in a more beautiful one ... Others didn't want to leave, but they were richer, financially speaking.

As the quote suggests, some saw relocation as an opportunity for upward mobility, while others (generally those who were wealthier) feared a downgrading of their living standards. What is undeniable, however, is that the relocations represent an intervention by capital to change established socio-spatial relations, the effects of which remain to be determined. Will the Recea neighborhood in Alba Iulia become viable, self-sustaining communities, or will they lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of rural decay, as services are degraded and the population becomes ever more sparse?

A broader comparison of our findings with those of previous studies suggests that the discourse of local people has shifted over time (see Alexandrescu, 2013; Velicu 2012a, 2012b; Alexandrescu 2020). Whereas the period 2002 to 2010 saw strong political protests, and equally severe divisions between those for and against the expanded mine, the period of uncertainty since 2014 has revealed tensions between different understandings of extraction. The local community may be pro-traditional mining, but the type of extraction for which they are advocating is emphatically not that of a modern technologically equipped mine. Instead, their notion of mining emphasizes local ownership, older techniques, traditional identities, and community viability. This places them at odds not just with capital as embodied by the RMGC, but with a globalized extractive marketplace, in which extraction is intensified by mining at a much larger scale, making heavy use of technology. Our findings bear out those of Argent (2011, 188) who argues that:

rural industries, land uses and communities are now firmly bound up within an expanding and overlapping mesh of networks governing their activities from a variety of scales, from the local through to the global.

It seems unlikely that older methods of the type advocated by the community could deliver gold at a competitive market price, pointing to the globalized nature of competition in a neoliberal marketplace and the impacts of this at a local level, on individual communities.

## Conclusion

This article has examined contention over the Roșia Montană gold mine in Romania, drawing out the shifting relationships between capital, the local and national state, civil society organizations, and the local community, from 1997 to the present day. The controversy over the costs and benefits of the project has twisted and turned, as different stakeholders have risen to the forefront of an intensely politicized debate. The significance of the project has been linked to the need to reverse post-communist patterns of rural decline and provide a source of foreign investment that can generate employment, but also to state corruption, environmental degradation, and rapacious international capitalism. The views of the impacted local community, however, have been sometimes missing from these debates.

Our argument has centered on different understandings of extraction, with a particular focus on the local community. Interviewees recognized that mining is a particularly significant issue for threatened, small rural communities, where other opportunities for economic advancement are limited. In such a context, the threat of depopulation may raise significant concerns about the future viability of the community, as individuals relocate in search of new opportunities. Attachment to place, and the culture and tradition attached to mining as a form of labor, mean that such communities place considerable value in being able to maintain their heritage by continuing to extract resources in this way. As a result, rural communities facing pressures regarding their ongoing viability may therefore advocate for potentially damaging projects to be sited in their locality (Kojola 2020) on the basis of an older understanding of extraction as part of their traditional way of being and working in a place. However, as Argent (2011) notes, these newer/capital-intensive projects are embedded in global networks with many competing interests, including a very different understanding of extraction, as a high-tech and intensified form of natural resource exploitation, embodied by capital. Apparent support for mining amongst local communities needs to be carefully distinguished on the basis of its understanding of extraction from the very different position taken by international mining corporations.

This paper also points to the importance of the relational aspects of place, as global networks of power, capital and influence impact local stakeholders (Massey 1991) in a way that challenge any simplistic division between the “inside” and “outside” of a locality. Places are processes and the “power geometry” of such a place as Roșia Montană can arrange “different social groups, and different individuals, [...] in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections” (Massey 1991, 25; see also Alexandrescu 2020, 221–222). In a post-socialist context, these flows and interconnections are intensified by a major economic shift away from a planned socialist economy toward a capitalist system based on globally competitive resource extraction and maximization of profit. In response to this fluid situation, oppositions and alliances between the different interest groups involved in extraction are in a state of constant change, with fleeting and unstable alliances amongst different groups of actors or stakeholders at different moments. In particular, clear pro- and anti-mining stances prior to 2014 have tended to dissolve in the present situation, where the future of the mine is uncertain.

Realistically, the community is caught in the gears of a rapidly-changing, globalized extractive industry. Since their view of traditional, locally controlled mining is unlikely to be globally competitive, their choices seem grim: to capitulate to capital and accept the socially and environmentally deleterious effects of intensified extraction, or to accept that their community is no longer viable. However, there are alternatives. Tourism and the exploitation of extraction-as-heritage offers one solution, and the possibility that the area might be listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage site opens the door to development in this direction. However, in January 2020 the Romanian Ministry of Culture resubmitted an application to UNESCO for listing Roșia Montană as a world heritage site, but since early 2021 this has meant that the listing is yet to happen, and that the community continues to decline, with the local state powerless to prevent an exodus of people from the area.

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## Appendix Interview participants

ID	Occupation	Pro-traditional development (including pro-mining)/Anti-mining (pro-alternative development)
Ro1	Teacher	Pro-traditional development
Ro2	Entrepreneur	Anti-mining (pro-alternative development)
Ro3	Mine guard	Pro- traditional development
Ro4	Unemployed	Pro-traditional development
Ro5	Cleaning staff	Pro-traditional development
Ro6	Entrepreneur	Anti-mining (pro-alternative development)
Ro7	Unemployed daughter of local entrepreneur	Anti-mining (pro-alternative development)
Ro8	Employee of the City Hall	Pro-traditional development
Ro9	Employee of a local bar	Pro-traditional development
Ro10	Unemployed	Pro-traditional development
Ro11	Former RMGC employee	Pro-traditional development