

'Cyanide kills!' Environmental movements and the construction of environmental risk at Roşia Montană, Romania

Lucian Vesalon* and Remus Creţan**

*Department of Political Science, West University of Timișoara, Romania

Email: vesalon@polsci.uvt.ro

**Department of Geography, West University of Timișoara, Romania

Email: remus.cretan@cbg.uvt.ro

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This study examines the issue of environmental risk involved in a proposed gold-mining project at Roşia Montană, Romania, as it was articulated in the discourses and strategies of the environmentalists protesting against it. We base our paper on the idea that environmental risk has a socially constructed horizon and that counter-discourses on risk represent a fundamental contribution of the environmental protesters to the anti-mining movement. This opposition can be integrated in a broader debate regarding the social and environmental costs of industrial development. The alternative conceptualisation of risk goes beyond narrowly defined ecological issues and applies to the more encompassing perspective of 'communities at risk'. The anti-mining movement's complex repertoire of contention and especially its challenging discourses on risk make it a unique development in post-socialist environmentalism.

Key words: *environmental movements, environmental risks, NGOs, Roşia Montană, Romania*

Introduction

This paper discusses the issue of environmental risk involved in a proposed gold-mining project at Roşia Montană (Figure 1) as it is constructed by environmentalist movements in relation to the anti-mining protests. The proposed open-cast mining project would use a process involving the use of cyanide for gold extraction. The proposal triggered specific public debates regarding ecological risks and an environmental protest movement over more than a decade. The environmentalists have exposed the potential contribution of economic interests and political power to the environmental decisionmaking processes and have challenged the dominant representations of environmental risks from the use of cyanide in the mining industry. The most emotive rallying-call of the opposition to the mining project, as encapsulated by their most popular slogan was 'cyanide kills!'

We base our paper on the concept that environmental risk is a hybrid idea, including a socially constructed horizon, a scientific dimension and a political framework.

Our interest stems from the ways in which environmental movements contribute to the construction of alternative representations of risk. We adopt a perspective on environmental risk that is based on a middle path between environmental positivism and relativism, or more specifically between what Shrader-Frechette (1991, 9) calls 'cultural relativists' and 'naïve positivists'. Representations of environmental risk and their linkage to specific ecological goals lie at the heart of contemporary environmentalism. Competing representations of risk emerge from the tensions between environmental movements and political actors, economic interests and the scientific community (Bäckstrand 2004). An analysis of environmental discourses against dominant frameworks of assessing ecological costs helps to reveal the contribution of these interests to the construction of particular risk frameworks (Hajer 1997; Griggs and Howarth 2000). It is therefore of fundamental importance to understand how specific representations of risk, in the context of ecological protests, result from the interactions of environmental movements with other social actors and with political and economic structures.

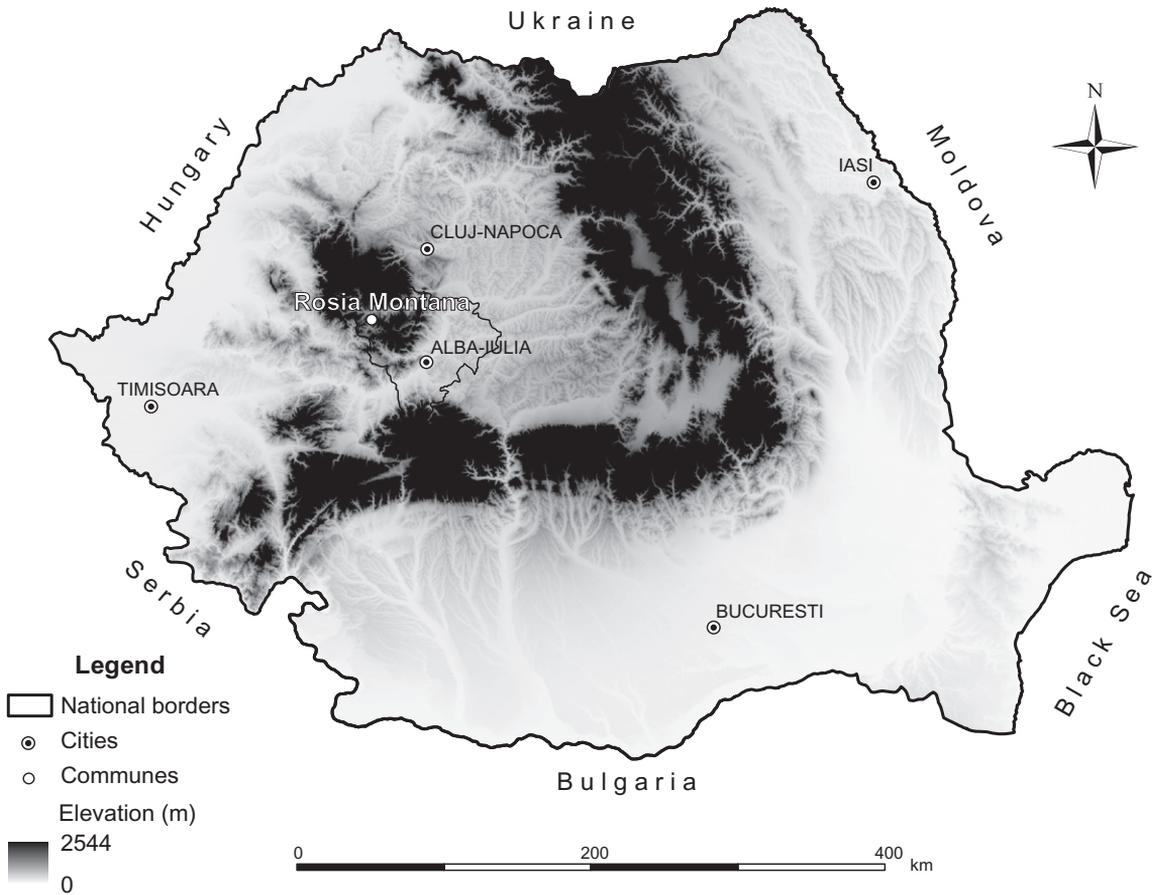


Figure 1 Location map of the Roșia Montană mine within Romania

Theoretical background and research design

This paper is based on recent attempts in risk studies to find an intermediate position between two types of reductionism: one that grounds environmental risk in social norms and cultural values, and the other that defines risk as a scientific, value-free concept (Shrader-Frechette 1991). Such an intermediate position recognises the fundamental contribution of environmental discourses, green ideologies and environmental movements to specific framings of environmental risk. It also accepts that risk assessment is a particular scientific enterprise with relatively autonomous norms and procedures, but one that is not entirely free from economic and political interference. Risk is then constantly redefined and reassessed in an open process that includes various actors, distinct interests and competing ideologies (Beck 1992; Joffe 2003). As Kadvaň explains, environmental risks are ‘pushing society to *different* limits. Collectively these risks are acting, or have the potential to act, as a powerful machine for social reflection, social criticism, and social change’ (1997, 123). All risks affect

individuals, but also have an effect on groups, making collective identities vulnerable (Joffe 2003, 66). Particularly relevant for our analysis is the idea that risk is connected to specific groups or communities, which can be seen as ‘communities at risk’ (Couch and Kroll-Smith 1991). This idea represents a core component of the middle position between positivism and radical constructivism because it combines the idea of grounding risk in scientific frameworks with the inclusion of counter-positions on risk in a broader perspective on the social and environmental impact of industrial development.

The issue of environmental risk construction has been deeply influenced by the seminal work of Beck and his idea that risks can

be changed, magnified, dramatized or minimized within knowledge, and to that extent they are particularly *open to social definition and construction*. Hence the mass media and the scientific and legal professions in charge of defining risks become key social and political positions. (1992, 23)

Risks are defined and negotiated in contexts sensitive to political decisions and economic interests and these interfere with the scientific basis of risk assessment. On the other hand, ideologies and social values make a more profound contribution to shaping representations of environmental risk, involving both social movements and institutional actors (Joffe 2003).

From the social constructionist perspective, we adopt the mainstream idea that

a risk is never fully objective or knowable outside of belief systems and moral positions: what we measure, identify and manage as risks are always constituted via pre-existing knowledges and discourses. (Lupton 1999, 30)

Representations of risk are not entirely culture-related and disconnected from scientific research; the influence of science on public perceptions of risk and the emergence of a hybrid set of representations were formulated in the late 1970s by Latour and Woolgar (1979). From social constructionism we also retain the idea that environmental movements and protests are part of a network of actors that produce representations of environmental risks, which are then daisy-chained to other values and ecological ideals. This is the case with environmental protests targeted against industrial activities, contributing to the creation of new perspectives and counter-discourses on environmental risk, especially in connection with ecological disasters. Environmental movements often mediate between the scientific community and the general public, and can therefore be seen as key actors in the construction of representations of risk for the public (Van Loon 2002). With broader citizen support, environmental movements can shape norms and regulation in the area of environmental risk. They can participate in negotiating environmental rights, which are deeply connected with protection against environmental hazards and risk alleviation procedures. This demonstrates that the contribution of politics to the framing of risk is not a one-way street, but that it can also open dialogue and may eventually contribute to the development of 'green states' (Dryzek *et al.* 2003; Eckersley 2004).

From discourse analysis we use the idea that specific signifiers are produced in contexts involving antagonistic actors struggling to control the public agenda (Hajer 1997; Griggs and Howarth 2000). For environmental discourses, this means that different actors compete to define frames of environmental assessment and partially control the production of knowledge of ecological risk. As this paper demonstrates, different articulations of environmental risk are a key element in the contribution of environmentalists to alternative ecological agendas, discourses and counter-discourses contributing to a framing of risk within particular socio-political contexts (Dryzek

et al. 2003; Rootes 2003). This illustrates not only the importance of producing counter-discourses in environmental activism, but also that 'environmental conflict has changed. It has become discursive' (Hajer 1997, 13).

In order to understand the participation of environmentalists in the construction of counter-discourses on risk, we refer to a selection of reports, position papers and press releases by the national and international NGOs campaigning against the mining project, but also the most representative slogans put forward during the anti-mining protests. We also consider the contribution of other actors, such as the Romanian Academy, to the construction of counter-positions on environmental risk through alternative expert opinions. In parallel, we contrast the environmental risk perspective articulated by NGOs supporting the mining project with that defined by the anti-mining coalition. We have supplemented this with positions taken on environmental risk, environmental reports and data sets provided by mainstream and alternative Romanian media. The materials selected were produced during the period 2002–2012 in a highly polemical context within which alternative perspectives on environmental risk were considered alongside the expertise on which the mining company based its environmental impact assessments (EIA). The criteria used for the selection of empirical sources were the visibility of materials for the general public, such as online and printed publications, and the significance of their contribution to the on-going debates on the ecological risks of the Roşia Montană gold mining project. The documents selected were grouped according to the dimensions of environmental risk involved in the mining project and then analysed in the terms of their potential contributions to a critical, alternative perspective on risks.

Constructing representations of risk at Roşia Montană

The Roşia Montană gold mining project (Figure 2) is among the biggest and the most controversial industrial development initiatives in post-communist Romania. It has been under evaluation by the Romanian authorities for more than a decade and the future of the project is still uncertain. The project was initiated in the late 1990s by the Canadian company Gabriel Resources, which together with the Romanian state-owned company, Minvest, formed the joint venture Roşia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC). The proposed technology uses open-cast mining and a cyanide-based process for gold extraction, and would also lead to degradation of a mountainous area. One of the most heated debates centred on the displacement of population that would occur as a result of the construction of the gold mine. The project

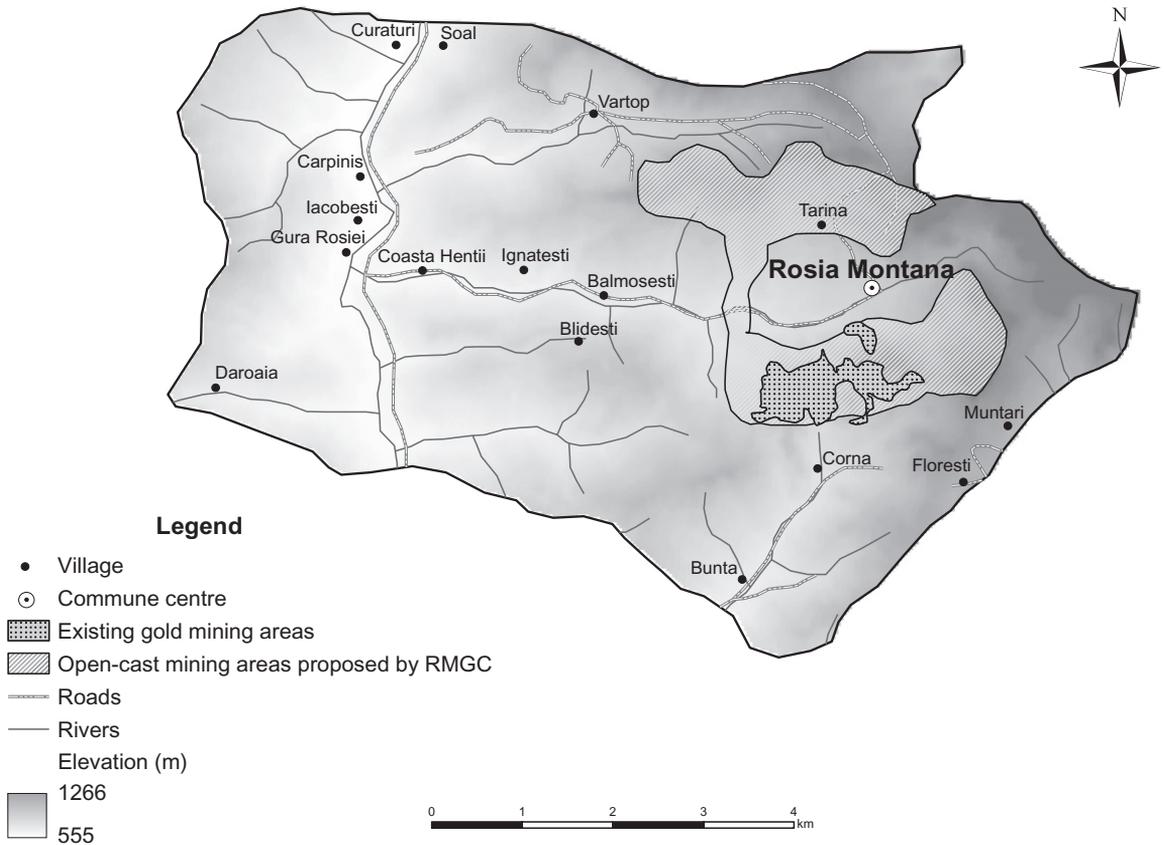


Figure 2 Detailed location map of the open-cast mining activity proposed in the Roșia Montană area
 Source: adapted from RMGC, 2012

sparked numerous criticisms and generated significant debates regarding the consequences of industrial development in post-communist states. A core issue is that the gold mine will produce a mono-industrial area with no alternatives to mining and will result in significant health hazards and environmental degradation.

The Roșia Montană mining project gave rise to one of the strongest and most visible environmental protests in Central and Eastern Europe. Several international NGOs, including Greenpeace, WWF and Mining Watch, contributed to its global reach. The conflict sets a coalition formed by the local population, numerous environmental NGOs and various civil society groups against RMGC and its allies. The anti-mining coalition produced highly complex repertoires of action, new discourses and has evolved into the dominant voice against industrial development in post-communist Romania (Vesalon and Crețan in press).

The discourse of the environmental movement against the mining project is constructed around two main signifiers, ‘community’ and ‘risk’. The reference to ‘com-

munity’ emerges from the critique of the population displacement programme, while ‘risk’ is based on a counter-discourse on the environmental consequences of the mining project. As we demonstrate below, the fusion of these two signifiers into the ‘community at risk’ is the discursive strategy that seeks to destabilize the framework of the pro-mining discourse. In the last decade, the movement has been centred on the activity of Alburnus Maior, the core organisation coordinating the opponents to the mining project. In more concrete terms, it provided the basis for new debates on the social and environmental impact of the project, on its economic costs and benefits, and on the legal framework regarding the mining project. As a result, alternative reports were produced and contributed to different perspectives for the potential consequences of the mining project. These reports can be grouped in levels of analysis, including involuntary resettlement (Olaru-Zăinescu 2006); public consultations (Haiduc 2006); EIA (Moran 2006); and the legal dimension of the mining project (Fischer and Lengauer 2002). This contribution illustrates that the assessment of

environmental risk is an open process on which alternative and critical positions from civil society have a significant impact.

The proliferation of counter-discourses on risk blurs the hard line separating environmentalists and scientists. This blurring can also be seen in terms of an emerging middle ground between relativism and positivism and serves to negate the 'principle of complete neutrality', based upon the assumption that 'risk estimates can completely exclude normative (ethical and methodological) components' (Shrader-Frechette 1991, 39). On many occasions, ad hoc alliances have formed and exposed particular risks involved in the mining project. Their contribution has included the gathering of new data; the interpretation of relevant EU and Romanian environmental legislation; the definition and refinement of the frames of reference for the EIA; the raising of public awareness of the complexity of environmental risk; and the promotion of a holistic and inter-generational concept of risk. All these combine to generate counter-discourses on risk. An inter-connected claim made by the grassroots movement was to broaden the scope of risks taken into account during the decisionmaking processes in the mining industry. It is worth noting that the problems covered by the participating NGOs are not limited to the environment, but also include cultural activities, sports and recreation, outdoors activities, democracy and public policy, social economy and ethnic issues.

The anti-mining discourses and the environmentalists' agenda indicate that environmental protection is seen as a cross-cutting issue rather than a single dimension addressed within a specialised ecological discourse. As such, environmental protection can provide the common ground for wider cooperation strategies between different actors in civic society. For instance, numerous NGOs have created a common platform for assessing the potential consequences of the mining project. In 2010, 70 NGOs issued a declaration to expose the government's support of the project, the main reason being related to environmental risk:

the severe certain and potential environmental problems raised by the Roşia Montană mining project are a sufficient ground for unequivocal and definitive rejection of the project. (Alburnus Maior 2012)

Another unique protest involved 77 NGOs representing the Hungarian minority in Romania. One reason for their position is related to the concerns about the potential cross-border environmental effect of the RMGC project, a particularly strong case given the precedent of ecological/environmental accidents with a potential regional impact – the most severe being the contamination of the River Tisa and River Danube in 2000 by cyanide spills from gold-mining works near Baia Mare. The protests became

part of a wide-reaching movement that brought together actors from Romania and numerous international NGOs. The main campaign coordinating the majority of the anti-mining protesters is 'Save Roşia Montană'. Also well-known is 'Mindbomb', a guerrilla campaign based on provocative and unconventional posters suggesting the complicities of certain politicians with the mining company.

The environmental NGOs acting in connection with Roşia Montană are not integrated in a homogenous movement. The organisations opposing the mining project are the dominant voice, but during the last decade the mining company has backed different NGOs supporting the project, a situation known as 'astroturf lobbying' (Lyon and Maxwell 2004). This includes organisations such as Pro Roşia Montană and Pro Dreptatea (Pro Justice). It is significant that the position adopted by these NGOs results from the efforts to disarticulate the interpretation of risk offered by environmentalists and to dismantle the anti-mining coalition. The 'astroturf lobbying' can be seen as producing a counter-counter-discourse that reflects the articulations of the anti-mining discourse. The perspective defined by the pro-mining NGOs on risk involves the suggestion that the mining project is in line with European environmental regulations, that the project uses the most advanced mining technologies available and that environmental risk management is clearly addressed. The mining project is represented as being not only safe for the environment, but also as including remedial actions for the majority of the previous pollution problems in the area. The president of Pro Roşia Montană states that the mining project 'would protect the environment and would place foremost the cultural heritage and the traditions of this community' (Pro Roşia Montană 2013). The pro-mining discourse counters the environmental concerns defined by the anti-mining coalition by stressing the economic benefits. Pro-mining NGOs also argue that the existing alternative economic initiatives are not viable and that public concern regarding the use of cyanide is artificially created by the anti-mining protesters.

The mass media are divided on the issue of the gold-mining project. The Romanian media frequently reports on the case, while the international media brings it to wider attention, specifically in connection with monitoring the mining activities. As Berindei and Cuceu (2012) show, the Romanian mass media are generally supportive of the mining project and are involved in producing and reinforcing particular representations of risk at Roşia Montană. At the same time, however, there is a parallel evolution of anti-mining media discourses that may be seen in an increased specialisation of several journalists and civil society activists on the environmental impact of industrial projects. In connection with Roşia

Montană, the mass media has provided counter-expertise through specialist journalists or by publishing counter-expert opinions, a role that attracts particular attention in risk studies (Mythen 2004, 77). This also illustrates the fuzziness of borders between scientific expertise and environmental activism.

A key moment in the construction of counter-discourses on risk was the critique of the EIA prepared by the RMGC. For instance, suspicions surrounding the public consultations were raised by the local inhabitants, experts, journalists and environmental activists. An expert opinion published by the Romanian Academy highlighted deficiencies in the organisation of public consultations by the mining company:

There is no space for dialogue – or for the public to express their concerns – to enable the public authorities to take due account of these at the time of making the decision. The EIA Report itself is overwhelming in terms of volume and discouraging in terms of accessibility and content. (Haiduc 2006, 1)

The context in which public consultations were organised, with community life already disrupted by relocations, also contributed to impeding a more genuine public deliberation. The anti-mining protesters and several experts asked for more transparency in the planning of population displacement (Fischer and Lengauer 2002; Haiduc 2006). The analysis of the RMGC documents highlights the vulnerabilities and the absence of state institutions in monitoring of the resettlement project. Numerous voices from the local community and from civil society also pointed to the need for transparency and public participation in the preparation of the EIA (Moran 2006, 1; Haiduc 2006).

Alternative voices to the RMGC mining project also questioned the scientific accuracy of the EIA Report (Olaru-Zăinescu 2006; Moran 2006). Such alternative analyses bear witness to an emerging counter-expertise and the increasing public impact of Romanian environmentalism. They offer a critical alternative to the documents produced by the mining company, highlighting either irregularities or questionable scientific claims and challenging its interpretation of the available data. These alternative analyses make participation of the local community in public debates on the mining projects more meaningful and strengthen its bargaining position *vis-à-vis* the mining company and the government. At the same time, following the debates on Beck's (1992) analysis of risk, such alternative accounts are good examples of a counter-expertise developed in close connection with the activist positions (Mythen 2004, 77).

An alternative report on the compatibility of the mining project with EU legislation underlines that the relevant information about the project and its anticipated environ-

mental and social impact was not made available to the public in a timely manner. The report also highlighted that public consultations were affected by the involvement of RMGC personnel in the process and that only a small fraction of the local population had any actual opportunity to express their opinions. The conclusion was that 'the public concerned is apparently not being heard' and that the process of public consultations, at least in its early stages, was not conducted and only partially complies with the EU environmental legislation (Fischer and Lengauer 2002, 28).

Two interconnected demands are defined by the anti-mining discourses. The first is a demand for responsible state involvement in monitoring and regulating the mining project, including the preparation of the EIA. The second demand is for mandatory independent reporting on social and environmental effects of the mining project. These two claims are diametrically opposed to the self-regulatory mechanisms proposed by the mining company as well as to the tendency for deregulation of Romanian industry. The 'polluter pays' principle is frequently brought to the fore by the opponents of the project. Environmental protesters argue that the guarantees for its actual implementation in case of environmental disasters are unreliable and that precedent cases in the region, such as the cyanide spill at Baia Mare in 2000 and the red sludge disaster at Ajka, Hungary in 2010, highlight the real possibility that environmental costs are eventually paid by the state or minimised by the authorities. This background accounts for the development of a broader anti-deregulation position articulated through the anti-mining discourses.

The environmental protesters are competing to dominate the debates on environmental risk against the mining company, pro-mining NGOs, several political actors and lobbyists. This reflects a symptomatic situation, in which 'the environmental movement's virtual monopoly on "ecological discourse" has been lost' (Rootes 2003, 4). Despite the difficult consolidation of environmentalism in the post-socialist context, the anti-mining coalition has produced a compelling perspective on environmental risk. The lines of argument within anti-mining discourses are complex. These include scientific arguments regarding the mining industry (especially the use of cyanide), political considerations related to decisionmaking processes and ideas about the democratic deficit inherent in public debates regarding industrial development. An important contribution to the public awareness of environmental risk has been made by highlighting similar examples of developments around the world, particularly environmental disasters in the mining industry and cases of misconduct in post-disaster management.

The idea of 'communities at risk' is directly relevant to understanding the new representations of risk articulated

by environmental discourses (Couch and Kroll-Smith 1991; Joffe 2003). The anti-mining protesters demanded the recognition of the intrinsic value of the local landscape and environment and its fundamental importance for the local community. As an early study on this issue explained, the 'dispersed settlement pattern is an essential part of the Apuseni landscape which deserves to be preserved' (Surd and Turnock 2000, 299–300). This landscape is part of the local cultural identity, which is unique and therefore considered worthy of protection. There is a strong connection between the potential destructive consequences of the mining industry and this endangered local identity. As Joffe notes, 'different groups ascribe to different representations of risks in accordance with the identities that require protection' (2003, 66). A fundamental contribution of the anti-mining movement is the extension of the concept of environment to include, besides the natural environment, the cultural, historical and the built environment. The new concept of risk touches upon the idea of 'community at risk', rather than the narrower perspective of environmental risk. As highlighted above, this was at the core of the anti-mining discourses.

Another critical frame of analysis stems from the construction of 'anti-colonial' discourses. This was already signalled in the context of post-socialist states, for instance in Harper's discussion of 'eco-colonialist' development of hydro-electric power in Hungary (Harper 2005, 224). At Roşia Montană, this argument was raised from the very beginning of the environmental protests. The danger of 'neo-colonialist exploitation' of natural resources at Roşia Montană was signalled by Fischer and Lengauer (2002, 18–19). On the other hand, the study of the ecological/environmental consequences of the 'shock therapy' programme of transition to capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe is only just beginning. Examining the slogans produced by the anti-mining protesters, we find items such as 'Roşia Montană is not for sale' or 'Roşia Montană is not a gift', which signal their opposition to the privatisation of natural resources. The anti-mining protests expose the social and environmental consequences of the privatisation of natural resources and articulate new oppositions to the neoliberal consensus in post-socialist politics. The current study also reveals a more general picture increasingly present in post-communist industrial development and can contribute to further research on the alternatives to the dominant models of economic development in the region (Vesalon and Creţan in press).

The anti-mining movement has made a significant contribution to the construction of a new framework for the assessment of environmental risk. However, it is also important to recognise the limits of this alternative approach. Despite the large number of reports, technical documents and assessments, an alternative holistic environmental risk assessment to that provided by RMGC is

yet to be produced. Many relevant analyses continue not only to be produced disparately, but sometimes without a clearly defined goal. In many instances, the cooperation between NGOs is based on ad hoc alliances and lacks a truly common environmental/ecological platform. A more functional cooperation between scientific institutions, NGOs and activists would also help in securing the scientific expertise of alternative frameworks for risk assessment. Notwithstanding the notable progress in the construction of an alternative framework of environmental risk and despite cooperation between numerous actors within Romania and internationally, the anti-mining movement has not achieved its full potential in the decisionmaking process with regard to the Roşia Montană gold-mining project.

Conclusions

The counter-discourses on environmental risk produced by environmentalists and other opponents to the mining project challenging quasi-official risk narratives have contributed decisively to the debates on the social and environmental costs of industrial development in post-communist Romania. Issues of independent reporting, consistent monitoring and citizen participation in the EIA process are at the centre of current debates in environmental studies. Numerous arguments have converged on the idea that environmental rights should be specified as constitutional principles that would eventually contribute to the emergence and consolidation of 'green states' (Dryzek *et al.* 2003). The idea of rights of access to 'environmental information', especially with regard to 'risk-generating proposals' is central to these contributions (Eckersley 2004, 243–4). While independent environmental reporting is a pre-condition for such rights, it is worth stressing that the production of counter-discourses by environmentalists on risk and the emergence of counter-expertise positions make such rights more meaningful.

Basing our analysis on specific signifiers and demands used in several discursive frameworks, such as EIA, public consultations and the legal dimension of the mining project, we conclude that in the case of Roşia Montană the environmental agenda remains a contested terrain, the issue of risk reveals the intrinsic tensions between environmental movements, state actors, economic actors and scientists. In this case study, the fundamental contribution of the environmental movement is the constitution of a 'civic expertise' on risk, which has helped influence 'a transformation of dominant practices of science to be more transparent, responsive and accountable to citizens' (Bäckstrand 2004, 705). This shows that a new conceptualisation of risk is needed, one in which risks applies to 'communities at

risk', rather than to environmental risk *per se* (Couch and Kroll-Smith 1991; Joffe 2003). A key contribution of the environmental movement is the extension of the concept of environment to include, in addition to the natural environment, the cultural, historical and the built environment (Surd and Turnock 2000). Such contributions can be best understood from a middle perspective on risk between scientific positivism and cultural relativism. By proposing a middle pathway, we have highlighted that environmental risk at Roșia Montană includes a socially and culturally constructed horizon that plays a fundamental role in shaping public perceptions of risk. We have also witnessed a struggle to open up the field of science to a counter-expertise on ecological risks, which demonstrates how the science of risk itself is partially influenced by social actors and the mass-media in highly polemical contexts (Lupton 1999; Berindei and Cuceu 2012).

The analysis of environmental discourses produced in the struggle against the mining project has helped to reveal the details regarding the construction of alternative perspectives on risk within the mining industry (Hajer 1997; Griggs and Howarth 2000). The anti-mining protesters do not have a monopoly on environmental discourse at Roșia Montană: their perspective on risk has not remained unchallenged, whether by the mining company itself, by NGOs created to support RMGC's initiative, or by political actors and a portion of the mass-media. On the other hand, the Roșia Montană anti-mining movement has succeeded in fuelling public debates and in offering critical arguments to expose and explain to the public the social and environmental costs of the mining project. The anti-mining movement's expanding toolbox, its capacity to forge new alliances and the novelty of its environmental discourse provide a firm foundation for the future of Romanian environmentalism.

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