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‘We are not the Wild West’: anti-fracking protests in Romania

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The protests against recent proposals for exploring and extracting shale gas in Romania are analysed. Examining the specific demands formulated by protesters, we investigate the articulation of a counter-discourse on the social control of natural resources and on the ecological risks involved in the shale gas industry. At the same time, the protests indicate a destabilisation of the post-communist neoliberal consensus by opposing the privatization and deregulation of natural resources. Using a critical political ecology framework, we identify the formation of a specific ‘technonatural’ environment of shale gas, which includes economic interests, political decisions and ideological representations specific to the neoliberalization of natural resources.

Keywords: ‘fracking’; environmental protests; shale gas; neoliberalisation; environmental organisations; Romania

Introduction

Shale gas extraction is among the newest hopes for fuelling economic growth and maintaining current energy consumption patterns in the industrialised world. The method of hydraulic fracturing – ‘fracking’ – has sparked numerous debates and protests over its ecological risks. But the risk dimension of fracking is not the only aspect of the industry that concerns the public. The shale gas industry is also one of the most privatised and deregulated industries. From a critical political ecology perspective, the shale gas industry produces a specific ‘technonatural’ landscape, which is especially determined by the current trends in the neoliberalization of natural resources (Swyngedouw 1999, Harvey 2006).

Here, we discuss the protests in Romania against the announced plans of the government to authorise multinational companies to explore the country’s shale gas deposits. The opposition to the shale gas industry is among the most recent and challenging evolutions in the post-communist Romanian protest culture. Our research seeks to expand knowledge of the contradictions involved in industrial development (Beck 1992, Van Loon 2002, Ciccantell and Smith 2005) by examining the anti-fracking protests in terms of their contribution to the

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construction of critical perspectives on the social control of natural resources and ecological risks.

The articulation of anti-industrial development discourses with the opposition to neoliberal programmes of privatising natural resources is under-investigated in the literature on post-socialism (Harper 2005), and especially so with respect to Romania. A critical examination of the current neoliberal environment in which the economy of natural resources is situated is important for understanding the political ecology of Romanian shale gas extraction. By analysing the demands formulated by anti-fracking protesters, we seek to determine the extent to which environmental protests contribute to destabilising the consensus on the neoliberal exploitation of natural resources. By selecting a Romanian case, we reveal how the specific political and economic context of the post-communist countries imprints the agenda of the anti-fracking movement. We see environmental protests as the terrain on which new ecological demands and reactions to loosening the social control on natural resources are formulated. The provocative slogan produced during the protests – ‘*We are not the Wild West of American investors!*’ – plays precisely this role of articulating public opposition to the enduring neoliberal economic agenda for Central and Eastern Europe.

The political ecology of fracking

Our theoretical perspective brings together the critical debates in political ecology concerning the production of ‘technonatures’ (Swyngedouw 1999, Castree 2005, Finewood and Stroup 2012) with the literature on environmental discourses (Hajer 1997, Griggs and Howarth 2000, Stavrakakis 2000). Existing research on the shale gas industry and on the anti-fracking protests is mostly focused on the US and European experiences (Reins 2011, McGowan 2014), with the business and investment perspective being especially covered in the literature (Longnecker and Kuschel 2012). Academic interest in the opposition to the shale gas industry is growing, with critical perspectives gaining ground (Finewood and Stroup 2012, Perry 2012, Rozell and Reaven 2012). Although the protests against industrial development in Central and Eastern Europe have received increasing attention (Fagan and Carmin 2011), the anti-fracking movement is not yet charted.

The term ‘technonature’ is used in political ecology to account for the fusion of political power, economic interests, technologies and cultures in human interventions in nature (White and Wilbert 2009). Technonatures result from ‘a process of production in which both nature and society are fused together in a way that renders them inseparable, producing a restless “hybrid” quasi-object...’ (Swyngedouw 1999, p. 461). The concept of technonature helps to explain the complex interactions between society and the environment mediated by political power and embedded in specific ideological frameworks. As recent developments in critical political ecology suggest, transformations of nature by human intervention are always mediated by political power and economic interests

(Castree 2005). In similar terms, albeit with different theoretical purposes, Beck and Giddens use the term 'societalized nature' to denote the risks inherent in the anthropogenic transformation of the natural environment informed by specific 'knowledge systems' (Giddens 1991, p. 127; Beck 1992, p. 82).

Hydraulic fracturing produces profound changes to the environment in which it operates, but by comparison with other industries, these changes can be less immediately visible. Because shale gas transforms the environment in new and radical ways, generating a hybrid reality, we have chosen the concept of 'technonature' to refer to the transformation of 'hydraulic landscapes' and have applied it to the eco-political environment of fracking. The environment produced by hydraulic fracturing is a 'technonature' in the sense that it combines natural elements – rocks and water – with the complex chemical compounds that form the liquid pumped under high pressure to fracture the rock bed and release the shale gas. At the same time, this new environment includes economic and political decisions, regulatory frameworks and specific conceptions about nature-society relations.

From a political ecology perspective, the exploitation of shale gas takes place within a neoliberal framework (Finewood and Stroup 2012). Understanding the shale gas industry as an example of the production of technonature provides important opportunities for a critical perspective on the neoliberalization of natural resources in the post-communist context. The contradictions of the capitalist exploitation of natural resources are widely discussed in the context of critical assessments of industrial development (Foster 1999, Ciccantell and Smith 2005). This perspective is particularly important for making sense of the connection between anti-fracking protests in Romania and the neoliberal environment in which this new 'hybrid' reality operates. This framework for the exploitation of natural resources, including the distribution of environmental risk in society, is provisionally stabilised by power relations. As we show next, this field of power also opens up new possibilities for public opposition to manifest itself. In their various forms, environmental counter-discourses and protests are mobilising citizens against environmentally destructive activities (Rootes 2003).

The construction of alternative and critical perspectives on ecological risks is a key contribution of environmental movements. By opposing industrial development, they produce counter-discourses on risk and expose the economic and political nexus that determines specific risk management frameworks. The political ecology of risk is therefore interested in the possibilities of defining new environmental rights for citizens (Eckersley 2004). While recognising the importance of such environmental reforms, our focus is more on the protests and conflicts resulting from the distribution of risks in society. Environmental risks are thus constantly re-articulated in an antagonistic context which involves competing ideologies (Stavrakakis 2000, Van Loon 2002). The critical arguments on the construction of risk directly apply to the dominant neoliberal environment which deregulates the management of risk and the exploitation of natural resources. This has a fundamental impact on the legal and economic aspects of

risk, especially on modalities of externalising environmental costs onto society and on producing uneven distributions of risk in society (Beck 1992).

Specific positions on risk result from conflicts over the ecologically and economically optimal exploitation of natural resources. At the same time, the counter-discourse on risk presupposes a chain of demands, which include the control of the use of natural resources, a greater social control of industrial development in general and, in specific cases, a more radical opposition to the neoliberalization of natural resources. This opposition is certainly more encompassing than providing specific frameworks for the management of risk, bringing specific legal and economic mechanisms for defining costs and benefits, public priorities, and levels and mechanisms of decision (Finewood and Stroup 2012). The shale gas industry in the post-communist era is a typical neoliberal development because it combines at least three core elements of the neoliberal doctrine: privatization, deregulation and liberalisation (Duménil and Lévy 2005, Harvey 2006). This means that gas deposits are bought and then gas is extracted from them by private companies, that complex economic and technical procedures are largely deregulated, and that finally the gas is distributed via a liberalised market. However, to understand the more profound consequences of the neoliberalization of natural resources, we need to pay more attention to the changes in the nature-society relationship produced by the shale gas industry.

Contextualising fracking: ‘Energy El Dorado’ or ‘Fata Morgana’?

Hydraulic fracturing for shale gas extraction is a controversial industrial technology. Although it has been used for decades, mostly in the US, the environmental impact of fracking remains partially unknown to the public (Hagström and Adams 2012, Rozell and Reaven 2012). This has to do with the deregulated legal framework in which the shale gas industry operates and with the physical and chemical complexity of hydraulic fracturing. The chemical mix used for fracking is protected by patents, which makes independent analysis of its environmental impact difficult. Both in the US and in the EU shale gas is generally not the subject of specific legislation (Reins 2011, McGowan 2014). In the EU, important shale gas deposits are charted in several member states, such as France, the UK, Sweden, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania and exploration licenses have already been granted in the UK, Poland and Romania. Following unprecedented environmental protests in 2011 and 2012, Bulgaria has recently put a moratorium on the technology of hydraulic fracturing, which indicates that despite the structural drive for shale gas extraction, there is a degree of vulnerability of the coalitions supporting the shale gas industry.

Summarising the Romanian media reports on the case, we find two symptomatic expressions used in connection with the perspectives of exploiting Romanian shale gas – ‘Energy El Dorado’ or ‘Fata Morgana’ – to refer to the problematic status of this industry. Both images are illustrative of the complex mix of economic interests, political decisions and discourses which define the

shale gas case. A strong argument brought forward by the supporters of the shale gas industry is the imperative of increasing energy security (Sharples 2013).

In Central and Eastern Europe, where fears are widespread among politicians and the public that Russia will be able to control domestic policies of other states by using its natural resources, energy security generally involves independence from Russian gas imports. Dependence on gas imports from Russia is thus a highly sensitive geopolitical issue in the region, and the newly discovered shale gas deposits are believed to cover domestic demand for several decades in Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. Another common argument in favour of shale gas exploitation in these three countries is their dependency on foreign direct investment, which has been amplified in the context of the current economic crisis. With the energy giant Chevron and other big companies interested in investing in the shale gas sector in Central and Eastern Europe, and with the political drive to attract such investments, public opposition to the industry has an increasingly difficult case to defend.

Thus energy security is a core element in the discourse of supporters of the shale gas industry and is aimed at influencing the public position by highlighting both the economic benefits and the geopolitical advantages of developing a strong shale gas sector in Romania. The energy security argument can thus weaken public opposition to the development of the shale gas industry.

Yet although energy security is among the most important political topics in Europe (Vogler 2013), the geopolitical dimension of fracking in Romania is different from that in the Western European context and is based more on the construction of the complex dangers involved in dependence on Russian natural resources. In recent years a number of big energy infrastructure projects were designed to transport gas and oil from Central Asia to Europe, for instance, Nabucco (a pipeline connecting Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Austria), the AGRI (Azerbaijan – Georgia – Romania Interconnector) agreement and Southstream (which would deliver gas from Russia to Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Austria). The idea of an ‘energy independent’ system remains a core issue in Romanian politics and was even used in connection with the political myth of ‘returning to Europe’ by distancing the country from the communist world to which Romania belonged before 1989. Interestingly, the national interest argument is used by both opponents and supporters of the shale gas industry.

In Romania, natural gas imports from Russia are estimated to comprise approximately 30% of total consumption, but they have varied considerably in the last five years, between a maximum of 3.567 million tonnes and a minimum of 1.614 million tonnes, while the Romanian production of gas was between 8.982 million and 8.407 million tonnes during the same period (INSSE 2012, p. 57). On the other hand, no comprehensive data on shale gas deposits in Romania have yet been made public, and so the industry’s potential output is difficult to estimate. Additionally, the gas market is in the process of a gradual liberalisation according to the plans negotiated with the EU, and this will make it more difficult to confine the distribution of shale gas to the national market.

Therefore the case for fracking as a route to energy independence becomes increasingly uncertain.

Although a moratorium on shale gas was introduced and then annulled after the parliamentary elections of 9 December 2012, there was a significant degree of cross-party support for shale gas exploitation, with the government supporting the exploration activities. Of the main projects for extracting shale gas, exploration licences have been granted to Chevron in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Romania (Government decisions no. 188, 189 and 190, published in the Official Monitor, part I, no. 205, 28 March, 2012). The main deposits on which prospecting licences were granted are situated near Bârlad, in the east, as well as in the southern part of the Romanian Black Sea shore. Granting exploration licences to private companies from the very beginning makes any future attempts to either stop shale gas exploitation or produce a more regulated environment for the industry increasingly difficult. These developments were little known by the public until several environmental NGOs revealed key information about prospective sites and future plans to begin exploitation.

The ecological risks posed by fracking are at the core of the environmentalists' opposition. Although shale gas is reportedly cleaner than other extracting industries, serious concerns about possible contamination of water and soil are widely documented (Reins 2011, Hagström and Adams 2012, Rozell and Reaven 2012), and both in the US and in the EU there have been significant protests against shale gas exploitation. In what follows, we examine the contribution of the Romanian anti-fracking movement to the construction of critical positions on the social distribution of environmental risk and to the opposition against the neoliberal regime of natural resources.

The Romanian anti-fracking movement

Romanian environmentalists after 1989 were mostly active in fighting pollution and deforestation, as well as in efforts to minimise the ecological impact of previously- or newly-industrialised areas. Integration into the EU had a considerable influence on the Romanian environmental movement. It 'reinforced endogenously driven professionalization and institutionalization of civil society groups', and 'often contradicted the empowerment of non-state actors' (Börzel and Buzogány 2010, pp. 708–9), which means that the more radical environmental demands were excluded from the environmental agenda. One of the very few cases in Romania that broke with this pattern was the opposition against the Roșia Montană gold mining project (Vesalon and Crețan 2013). It is therefore important to understand the extent to which anti-fracking protests contribute to the mobilization of NGOs and to a potential radicalisation of Romanian environmentalism.

Numerous Romanian NGOs reacted promptly to the government's declared intention to grant licences for shale gas exploitation, the most active being Alma-Ro, Terra Third Millennium (Terra Mileniul III), VIRA, Eco-Civica, and

Greenpeace Romania. Many petitions and open letters were produced and ad-hoc coalitions were formed. The Romanian Coalition for the Environment (Coaliția pentru mediu), including 69 NGOs, produced an open letter requesting the end of any shale gas operations on Romanian territory, and initiated the moratorium on fracking from June to December 2012. Two NGOs were most actively involved: Terra Third Millennium, founded in 1998 and with vast involvement in environmental programmes; and Alma-Ro, an ENGO established in 2001 with an average-sized portfolio of public administration and environmental programmes.

Terra Third Millennium was one of the first organisations involved in the fracking debate and contributed from the beginning to the dissemination of information on shale gas developments in Romania. There were also more unusual participating organisations, for instance the local branch of Casa de Ajutor Reciproc, a cooperative bank with a long history in Romania and very popular especially among the elderly, which was surprisingly active in organising the protests at Bârlad. Also important was the contribution of a local community organisation, the Civil Society Initiative Group (Grupul de Inițiativă al Societății Civile, GISC) from Bârlad. The participating organisations provided support and logistics for the organisation of protests and dissemination of messages at national and international levels. One of the most involved environmental activists, the geologist Georgeta Ionescu from the think-tank Green Institute, regularly participates in numerous debates and TV programmes on the shale gas issue and is perceived as one of the foremost voices of the Romanian anti-fracking movement.

Alma-Ro contributed to setting up a public debate and hearing on the environmental risks and economic dimension of Romanian shale gas. Their report on the current state of shale gas projects compiles the main arguments and counter-arguments, describes the basic legal, political and environmental issues involved, and includes policy recommendations. In connection with the anti-corporate positions of the campaigners, the report articulates the ‘national interest’ position against the ‘supporters of US interests’ (Alma-Ro 2012, p. 2). Significantly, the anti-fracking movement has elaborated this perspective further, sometimes subordinating ecological concerns to the rhetoric of national interest. Moreover, some groups extend this towards nationalism and national identity issues, as encapsulated in the idea that by beginning shale gas exploitation ‘we will have money, but we lose our identity, the bond with past generations and with our motherland’ (Alma-Ro 2012, p. 22). This is explained by the fact that local identities, especially in rural areas, are strongly connected to place and traditional agricultural activities, which the shale gas industry is perceived to endanger. Such an argument was mostly used by the more conservative and religious protesters and triggered negative responses and charge of autochthonism from more liberal protesters.

The NGOs involved in anti-fracking protests strategically made reference to the practices of other EU member states, for instance in their call for a moratorium on shale gas exploitation. A key step in the process was the organisation of a

referendum in Mangalia, Limanu and Costinești on 9 December 2012, concomitant with the parliamentary elections. At Mangalia, the referendum question was 'Do you accept the risk of affecting the underground water and tourism on the territory of Mangalia municipality, following shale gas exploitation in the south of the sea shore?' The referenda were not validated because participation failed to reach the 50% quorum, but the results suggest widespread opposition to shale gas exploitation. The fact that the referendum question was framed in terms unfavourable for the shale gas industry, by implying that risks are intrinsic and unavoidable in hydraulic fracturing, shows that local political interests can be highly divergent from the government's position and that environmentalist discourses can be used to legitimise these interests. Local government, being closer to the sites of anti-fracking resistance and benefiting less from shale gas exploitation than the central government, is usually more inclined to boycott the beginning of exploration activities. The recent opposition to exploration by the city council at Pungești illustrates this. At the same time, it is significant that the referendum was organised at a local level, although there is an ongoing debate about whether local or national referenda are the most appropriate for addressing the issue (Alma-Ro 2012, p. 15).

The largest national protest against fracking took place in March 2012 at Bârlad, and involved around 5,000 people. Smaller protests were also organised in front of the Romanian Embassy in London and the US Embassy in Bucharest. Significantly, the London protest was organised by a group of Bulgarian environmentalists in solidarity with the Romanian anti-fracking coalition. Other protests took place in Vama Veche on 1 May 2012 and again at Bârlad in September 2012. The 2012 protests were followed by a wider national rally against shale gas exploitation. On 4 April 2013 protests were simultaneously organised in numerous towns and cities, such as Bucharest, Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu, Craiova and Arad. The anti-fracking protests have developed further the tendency towards a greater integration of environmental movements and the strengthening of their networking capacity, something already evident in the anti-mining movement at Roșia Montană (O'Brien 2009, p. 154). A wide array of slogans created during the anti-fracking demonstrations shows the diversity of demands and the specificity of Romanian opposition to fracking in a regional context and in contrast with the US and UK cases. For example, the London protests and their slogans indicate a high degree of familiarity with the discourse of direct-action protests and with the strategies of trans-national environmental organisations, even though such complex and synchronised campaigns are relatively rare in Romanian protest culture.

The anti-fracking protests at Pungești are unique. Triggered by Chevron's attempts to begin exploration in the area, on 16 October 2013 between 500 and 1000 villagers (a very large number given the size of the village) gathered on a surrounding field and then blocked a road. An anti-fracking 'resistance camp' with tents and barricades was set up. Night watches were organised to prevent the entry of Chevron's equipment into the area. The gendarmerie intervened

repeatedly and produced the most confrontational situation in the country. Chevron adopted a back-and-forth strategy culminating in their installation of the drilling equipment, and the gendarmerie bringing numerous troops into the area. The anti-fracking slogans from Pungești are particularly relevant because they combine a concern with land and water pollution, local politics, and religious manifestations (including collective prayers). The local anti-fracking resistance immediately triggered national solidarity, especially in large cities. The Pungești slogan *'They shall not pass'*, echoing the World War I battles, is metaphorically used to refer to the anti-fracking 'Romanian front'.

Method and empirical sources

With the shale gas industry developing rapidly, protests and counter-discourses are also multiplying. We understand the demands formulated by the protesters as elements that acquire concrete meaning in antagonistic social fields (Laclau 2005). Mapping protesters' demands is fundamental for understanding the political and ideological context in which social movements develop (Hajer 1997, Griggs and Howarth 2000). Determining the content of these demands is therefore essential in mapping anti-fracking protests. We did this by identifying the articulation of these demands in the slogans produced during the anti-fracking protests. This helps to reveal the emergence of a new environmental discourse in Romanian protest culture.

The empirical base used for collecting the slogans includes national daily newspapers, the local media and electronic news platforms. In terms of content, both newspaper articles and multimedia content are relevant for protest analysis. In the discussion of environmental protests, national newspapers are generally preferred because they are more 'stable over time and uniform across territory' (Fillieule and Jiménez 2003, p. 260). We also considered local media sources because they usually reflect local events in greater detail than the national media and, especially relevant for our case, they provide more multimedia content related to the protests. We have used a content analysis approach for examining media sources. Four national newspapers and online news platforms have been selected. Local sources have been chosen according to the area in which shale gas proposed explorations and protests took place. Additionally, we have included one dedicated environmental publication, *Ecomagazin*. The newspapers and news platforms used in our analysis are presented in Table 1. Except for *Ecomagazin*, the selected sources lack a special section on the environment, articles on protests being generally included in the current news/events or in the live reporting section.

Secondly, we have identified all the articles reporting both on exploration activities and on protests, between February 2012 and December 2013. Besides journalists' reports, photographs from the protests posted on the online newspapers' databases were used for collecting the slogans and for identifying participating organisations and protesters' affiliations. In addition to media

Table 1. Anti-fracking protests in Romania: mapping protesters' demands.

| Place and dates of significant protests | Demands | Sample of slogans | Eco-political level |
|---|------------------------|---|---------------------|
| Bârlad (23 March 2012; 26 April 2012; 26 February 2013; 27 May 2013; 4 September 2013) | Global/general level | Planet before profits Hydraulic fracturing is destroying our planet Bulgaria and Romania free of fracking Attention: Chevron has polluted Kasachstan, Nigeria and Brasil Stop Chevron Countries have borders, nature doesn't Frack off Stop fracking Shale gas banned in Romania National referendum Romania says No to shale gas exploitation by fracturing Romania says no to fracturing Wake up, Romania! We protest on behalf of our country Don't fracture Timis! Thank you Bucovina Costinești-Eforie says no to water poisoning Buziaș says no to water and soil poisoning For a green Dobrogea Dobrogea and Moldova against shale gas | Politics of scale |
| London (27 February 2012) | National scale demands | | |
| București (12 April 2012; 4 April 2013; 16 October 2013) | Local scale demands | | |

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

| Place and dates of significant protests | Demands | Sample of slogans | Eco-political level |
|--|---|--|---------------------|
| Timișoara (4 April 2013) | Environmental protection and health risks | Don't fracture our future | Ecological level |
| Constanta (4 April 2013) | | Green and free without shale gas Say no to shale gas: don't kill us, we want to live! We want clean water | |
| Cluj-Napoca (4 April 2013) | | Take your hands off shale gas! | |
| Sibiu (4 April 2013) | | Exploitation means pollution | |
| Vama Veche (1 May 2013) | | The way out of a fossil fix is an energy mix Protected area against fracturing | |
| | | Stop the inferno! Help the people | |
| | | Save the Black Sea, Dobrogea in danger | |
| | | We want clean, not contaminated water! Don't pollute our wells | |
| | | Leave our nature clean and our water pure | |
| | | Stop the genocide | Economic level |
| Pungești (16 October 2013; 02 December 2013) | Economic demands | We can't drink money Your profit, our protest We don't need such working places Our land is not for sale Cheap gas, polluted environment | |

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

| Place and dates of significant protests | Demands | Sample of slogans | Eco-political level |
|---|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| | Environmental decision-making and democracy | They shall not pass Are we protected or exploited? We want to cultivate our land Don't poison our land Together we are the voice of change Refuse, resist, I don't want shale gas! For your health protests at least once a week Our nature, your decision We want justice and we are against fracking Are we everybody's fools? Just together! Chevron, go home! Why ignore us and not consult us? Down with Basescu! Down with Ponta! | Social control of natural resources |
| | Anti-government | Cyanide and shale: "presents from the Prime Minister" Gendarmerie protects thievery We are not the Wild West of American investors Welcome to Gasahstian! Behave yourselves! Do not protest! You are scaring the investors! Not the corporation makes the legislation | Political level |
| | Anti-neoliberal evolutions | | |

Sources: *Adevărul*, *Jurnalul.ro*, *Gândul*, *Cotidianul*, *Monitorul de Iași*, *Constănțeanul*, *Opinia Timisoarei*, *Vice Romania*, *Ecomagazin*, *Period*: 1 February 2012 – 2 December 2013

sources, participatory observation provided information on the protests from Timișoara. The main discrepancies found in the newspapers' reports of the events usually refer to the number of participants and to the importance attributed to the event.

The next level in the content analysis of media items was to group the slogans according to the place and date of protests. The redundant or minor variations of slogans were assimilated to one main item. Key signifiers were used to assign specific demands to each slogan. We then listed and organised the slogans according to the demands formulated on two levels, their scope (global, national or local) and the issue of contention (environmental, economic, and political). These two dimensions were interpreted in an eco-political frame. The results were finally centralised in [Table 1](#).

Analysis: mapping protesters' demands

We identified several demands and levels of opposition in the discourses of contention: environmental (related to the ecological risks involved in fracking); political (transparency and public participation in environmental decision-making); and socio-economic (the maximisation of public benefits from the use of natural resources and the defence of private property). We have included these types of demands, together with the corresponding slogans, in a framework of protests analysis (see [Table 1](#)).

Most of the actions undertaken by the NGOs are focused on moderate or reformist demands, basically demanding closer cooperation between state and civil society organisations, and transparency and participation in decision-making processes. This tendency towards the institutionalisation of the relations between environmental organisations and state actors is indeed specific to moderate and reformist environmentalism (Rootes 2003, Fagan and Carmin 2011). In this respect, NGOs appear more as partners of the state than opponents of the state policies of neoliberalizing natural resources. However, this co-optation of NGOs should not be seen as increasing their capacity to significantly influence environmental decision-making. As noticed for instance in the case of the implementation of the 'Natura 2000' agenda in Central and Eastern Europe, the contribution of NGOs 'hardly goes beyond consultation and the delegation of technical tasks' (Börzel and Buzogány 2010, p. 728).

In parallel, we note another evolution in the anti-fracking protests, which is largely disconnected from the participating NGO, relatively decentred and based on a more radical environmental agenda. In this context, the state ceased to be seen as a partner in ecological reforms, but rather was seen as responsible for the degradation of the environment and as a collaborator with multinational corporations in the process of the commodification of nature in the current neoliberal environment. The fundamental point of the environmental activists is therefore not about improving the environmental standards of the shale gas industry, but rather about banning the industry entirely. In this section we chart the slogans

and banners used during the protests to determine to what extent anti-fracking protests are evolving towards a radicalisation of the environmental movements in Romania. Unfortunately, by translating them into English, many slogans in Romanian language lose their rhyme and their often subtle polysemantics.

At the most general level, we find anti-fracking slogans that reflect a global repertoire of contention. Many standard slogans with a global reach ('Stop fracking', 'Frack off') were widely used by Romanian protesters. Other and more particular slogans reveal the specificity of the anti-fracking protests in Romania. The slogans used during protests reflect different levels of concern with shale gas exploitation. The politics of scale targeted in the slogans include the local, national and global levels, in connection with decision-making processes, economic opportunities and ecological impact. There is an awareness of the regional dimension of the protest and of the importance of trans-national solidarities, with frequent references to the Bulgarian case. The national scale politics of natural resources was envisaged by demands to ban fracking and by calls for a national referendum. Local scale politics was targeted in slogans demanding the banning of exploration in specific towns or villages, almost every protest producing such local demands.

The NIMBY (Not-In-My-Backyard) pattern is seen as playing a key role in shaping the opposition to fracking, especially in the US. The value of houses and land, as well as the impact of fracking on the quality of underground water and on health, are major concerns. The Romanian case exhibits similar concerns, but the scope of the demands is considerably wider, including issues that go beyond a typical NIMBY agenda. At the same time, local protest groups formulate demands such as opposition to privatisation of natural resources or maximization of public benefits from natural resources. Thus the NIMBY pattern of contention has limited explanatory value for recent environmental movements in general (Boudet 2011), and for Romanian anti-fracking protests in particular. The anti-fracking protests at Bârlad in September 2012 and May 2013 present a unique element: the involvement of the Orthodox Church and its role in shaping discourses and mobilising the local population. The religious component of the protests is interesting to the extent to which it can be seen as a specific feature of the Romanian anti-fracking movement and its conservative components, although the influence of the Church in structuring protests is insignificant in large urban centres.

The environmental level of protests is essentially connected to environmental risk. Typical slogans for the ecological dimension *per se* are illustrated in Table 1. The environmental dimension also reveals an interest in the democratisation of environmental decision-making, with a focus on transparency and participation, and environmental justice. Deeply connected to ecological risks are concerns with human health, visible in such slogans as 'Don't poison our land' or 'Don't pollute our wells'. The risks involved in the shale gas industry are perceived as not limited to the natural environment, but including social, cultural and health risks for the local population. The anti-fracking coalition struggles to

show that environmental risks are more pervasive than generally considered and to develop a more risk-averse attitude within the public.

Because the environmental consequences of the shale gas industry are mostly of local and regional impact, a significant part of protesters' demands is focused on protection of the local environment. On the other hand, anti-fracking campaigners have imported not just strategies of action, but also data, arguments, reports and mass media materials from the global pool of knowledge on shale gas risks. Protesters have frequently used examples from the US to introduce to the Romanian public the environmental costs, and the political and legal complexity of the shale gas industry. Thus numerous screenings of the documentary film *Gasland* were organised to raise awareness and mobilise the public to oppose the development of the shale gas industry in Romania. The politics of fracking rapidly became a core element of environmental reporting in the national media.

The concern with society's control of natural resources is strongly reflected in numerous slogans. The democratisation of environmental decision-making through public participation, transparency and better protection of collective natural resources is a key concern highly visible during the protests. Politically relevant slogans mostly concern the perceived support for shale gas exploitation exhibited by President Traian Băsescu and, more recently, Prime Minister Victor Ponta. This latter level of protest targets political power as a site of complicity with multinational corporations and shows a deeper disengagement from the established environmental decision-making processes.

The slogans point to a heterogeneous participation and to an array of different demands. We find slogans revealing cosmopolitan values and global connections, but also more conservative and local values (for example 'God with us' or 'For a green Dobrogea'). Children are sometimes brought to protests by their parents, and send the message of ecological risks for future generations. We also find nationalist slogans (such as 'Roşia and Pungeşti – two Romanian hearts') in parallel with global ecological messages, slogans centred on human interests and more eco-centric messages (for instance 'Hydraulic fracturing is destroying our planet'). The anti-fracking movement is ideologically heterogeneous and strategically disconnected, reflecting the decentred model of the majority of recent environmental movements.

Two major targets of protests can be identified in connection with environmental consequences. The first is a concern with the complex risks of fracking, especially threats to human health, soil and water pollution, and potential earthquakes. The banners used in the slogans articulate these risks, which indicates a significant contribution of environmental protests to the production of counter-discourses on risk. The second component of the protests is opposition to resource exploitation by multi-national corporations in a deregulated environment. Anti-Chevron slogans are highly visible in all protests, both in the country and internationally. This second component contributes to the constitution of an emerging opposition to continuing trends in the neoliberalisation of natural resources (Finewood and Stroup 2012).

One particular slogan – ‘We are not the Wild West of American investors!’ – could condense the ecological concerns and the issue of society’s control of natural resources against its neoliberalization. ‘Wild West’ is used to signify concomitantly the lack of rules and the priority of the private over the public interest. It can refer both to the incapacity of state institutions to enforce regulations and to the retreat of the state from certain areas. At the same time, it is a symbol of rapid accumulation of wealth and profits. Associated with a multinational company, ‘the Wild West of American investors’ basically encapsulates opposition to neoliberal expansion in the sphere of Eastern European natural resources. This slogan has radicalisation potential, as a rejection of the privatisation of natural resources by Western multinational corporations and of national participation in the global regime of shale gas.

The technonature of shale gas

The anti-fracking slogans target a highly complex phenomenon that mixes together socio-economic, political and environmental dimensions. We have proposed using the concept of technonature to understand the complexity of the shale gas problem. The concept of risk is a bridge between the protests and the new environment of shale gas. The slogans capture the multi-dimensional risks that the shale gas industry produces. The shale gas industry generates a new technonature which transforms social and economic relations connected to the environment, externalises and offloads costs onto society in specific ways, and ‘normalises’ risks through a neoliberal regime of natural resources. A significant part of the Romanian anti-fracking protests of recent years exposes precisely the processes by which such environments are produced.

The new shale gas regime is constructed by specific political and economic relations, but at the same time the power structures and discourses created by such ‘socio-natural cycles’ open the possibility of new resistance strategies. One strategy used by protesters to destabilise this cycle was to offer a more complex interpretation of environmental costs, such as water and soil pollution by fracking technologies. As Finewood and Stroup show, ‘pro-fracking narratives serve to obfuscate the drilling process and normalize impacts on the hydro-social cycle’ and ‘local social and ecological resources [...] are situated within this scenario as mere factors in a broader marketplace of costs and benefits’ (2012, p. 71). This interpretation opposes the current practices in cost-benefit analysis of environmental risk by situating risks in a social perspective, outside the monetised costs normally accepted in a business cycle. The counter-discourse of the anti-fracking protests deconstructs the argument for monetising ecological risks in a deregulated framework based on cost-benefit analysis. This discourse is broadly articulated to anti-industrial narratives and it contributes to a broader critique of the current conventional development model.

The recent debates on risk governance demonstrate the need for integrating public positions and stakeholders’ interests in decision-making processes, which

is directly connected to the widespread idea that ‘risk assessment is confronted with three major challenges that can be best described using the terms “complexity”, “uncertainty” and “ambiguity”’ (Renn 2007, p. 28). Such an inclusion is intrinsically connected to the democratisation of risk governance. Recognising the importance of future research on risk management in the shale gas industry, our interest here has been connected to the conflicts arising from the tensions between civil society and the political and economic actors involved in producing the technonatural landscape of shale gas.

If successful, the privatization of shale gas would contribute to the expansion of the neoliberal regime of natural resources in Romania. The liberalization and integration of national energy markets in the European context are in progress. The Romanian shale gas experience could be understood in the context of EU energy policies, but also as a special case of the movement towards a deeper deregulation of natural resources. Under such circumstances, the possibilities of a public and more democratic control of natural resources would weaken dramatically. On the other hand, the protests show that such an evolution is partially vulnerable to public opposition, and the advocates of the privatisation of natural resources will have to find ways of accommodating increasingly adversarial social forces. The unfolding of protests is a mixed story, which presents on the one hand public opposition to privatization, but also a more liberal dimension focused on the democratization of environmental decision-making, and a rather conservative position on the protection of local communities and their traditional values.

Assessing the specificity of the post-communist transitions is certainly beyond the scope of this discussion, but we should briefly note that the expansion of neoliberalism was, until very recently, less publicly and politically contested in post-communist states than in Western Europe. The quasi-consensus on the expansion of the free market and its presentation as a ‘normal’ post-communist evolution immediately makes a more difficult field for anti-fracking protests, because they can be countered by being portrayed as an instance of opposition to economic modernization and European integration. Another difficult position for the protesters is the absence in post-communist states of a strong culture of environmental protest and the weakness of grassroots environmental organisations.

Evaluating the current state of shale gas debates, we could conclude that an element of the anti-fracking protests in Romania consists in a new critical frame for assessing the technonatural landscape of shale gas which interrupts the narrative of energy market deregulation. This does not necessarily produce a destabilisation of the dominant regime of natural resources, but certainly forces a diversification and adaptation of both discourses and policies connected to this regime. It can also lead to certain concessions being made to environmental organisations and to public demands for a more democratic and participatory politics of natural resources.

Conclusion

Anti-fracking protests are among the most recent developments in Romanian environmentalism. We have charted the growing opposition to the neoliberalization of natural resources and the environmental protests against industrial development, and its relation to a new culture of protest which has hitherto not been examined, unfolding in a country considered particularly vulnerable to the advance of free market reforms and where the opposition to privatisation is among the weakest in the region. The critical political ecology perspective used in our analysis provides valuable insights for understanding socio-ecological processes involved in the shale gas industry and the creation of a distinct environment that combines economic interests, political decisions and ideological representations. We have used the demands of the environmental protesters to understand the specificity of the movement, its contribution to the construction of critical positions on the social control of natural resources and the distribution of ecological risk, and its potential for destabilising the neoliberal consensus in which the use of natural resources was framed in the last two decades of post-communist transition.

Examining the documents produced by the participating NGOs we find two main lines of argument and contention, one related to the democratization of industrial and environmental decision-making processes and the other connected to the public interest in the management of natural resources. Through our examination of the construction of anti-fracking as a counter-discourse that articulates specific positions on the social control of natural resources and environmental risk, we have identified a moderate agenda, mostly connected to the participation of NGOs in the anti-fracking movement. This agenda generally includes demands for greater transparency and public participation in environmental decision-making processes and calls for the maximization of public benefits from the exploitation of natural resources. A part of the public opposition to the shale gas industry can be seen as a contribution to the debates on environmental norms and as opening a space of dialogue on environmental rights.

At the same time, there is also a more radical stream in the Romanian anti-fracking protests, which has the potential to destabilize the quasi-consensus regarding the privatization and deregulation of natural resources. The slogans produced during the protests reveal specific demands, ranging from a greater public control over the use of natural resources to a precautionary approach to ecological risk. A significant part of the anti-fracking protests in Romania display an interesting evolution in public opposition to the dominant pattern on which economic reforms during post-communism were based. Besides the diversification of demands and the strengthening of the environmental protection coalitions, these protests also indicate a certain destabilization of the post-communist neoliberal agenda, especially in connection with the privatization of natural resources.

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