

Chapter One Introduction

Roșia Montană has become a cause célèbre in the landscape of social and environmental conflicts in Romania and Central and Eastern Europe. The two decade-old conflict over the Romanian town that sits on top Europe's largest gold deposit has pitted pro-mining interests against those trying to preserve Roșia Montană. At the same time, the conflict has been an academic bonanza, particularly for young and aspiring researchers in the social sciences. The reason is that through its manifold implications, the place and the conflict surrounding it have drawn the attention of historians, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, political scientists, communication and legal scholars as well as of geologists, environmental scientists and engineers. For social scientists, in particular, the very unfolding of the conflict since the dawn of the new millennium has been a source of constant interest. The conflict has not been identical with itself at all times, therefore there is a need to distinguish between its different phases. The present book focuses on the initial phase, the one in which Roșia Montană has become a globalized place.

From a theoretical point of view, this book aims to contribute to a non-essentialist understanding of place under conflict, by paying close attention to the transformations unfolding at the point where the 'space of flows' erupts into and threatens to disrupt the 'space of places' (Castells 2000). The objective is to use insights from geography (through the notions of space and place) and anthropology - in particular Clifford Geertz's (1979) notion of experience near/ experience distant - to understand how a place is profoundly transformed under

conditions of a protracted political ecological conflict. This approach aims to contribute to further Doreen Massey's critique of the 'the billiard-ball view of place'. From such a perspective, places and their communities are endowed with certain essential characteristics that seem to be thoroughly tied to a given *locale*. When such a place becomes embroiled in a conflict, this view assumes that the reactions will be shaped by the essential features of that place and thus tend either towards resistance or victimization (e.g. Pedersen 2014, Lassila 2018). An alternative viewpoint has begun to emerge, however, which acknowledges that conflicts transform places in more complex ways than the resistance/victimization perspective allows for (Conde 2017). This book takes this argument further by showing how globalization selectively activates and re-signifies local relationships (e.g. Hovardas 2017). As a result of the conflict, the place and its inhabitants become re-connected with a variety of actors at various scales and are visibly transformed in the process. This happens both as a result of shifts in the global economy leading to fragmenting development (Scholz 2004) and the growth of transnational movements (Scheidel et al. 2018). Roşia Montană is considered here as a good example of a globalized place, dependent on decisions and strategies enacted out of global metropolises (Leibert 2013). But "globalized" does not mean hopelessly lost in the face of overpowering global influences. Globalized places are, I argue in this book, re-signified as political symbols by transnational environmental justice movements that oppose extractive projects.

To capture the making of a globalized place, I focus on Roşia Montană within a defined time period, between the years 2000 and 2010. This corresponds to a timeframe when the conflict over the mining project proposed by the Roşia Montană Gold Corporation (RMGC) unfolded in and around the historic village of Roşia Montană. The 'social conflict over place' – which is the *leitmotif* of this book – involves several interrelated processes that

occurred in connection with Roșia Montană but extended far beyond the geographic boundaries of this village.

First, RMGC began in 2002 the acquisition of properties to prepare space for its large-scale mining project. This led to a variety of strategies of the project developers to get the local property owners to sell their properties in the absence of any formal expropriation rights, as is common in the developing world (e.g. Tagliarino 2018). This generated an equally diverse panoply of responses from diverse property owners in the project impact area and from their variable allies.

Second, the conflict has been one over the meaning of place for most of the period surveyed here because it has involved different features of Roșia Montană as place. The landscape of Roșia Montană, its mining past, the ways of life of the inhabitants have been taken up and mobilized by all those supporting or opposing the RMGC project. The big debates that have characterized this period have been whether the environment in Roșia Montană is largely pristine or historically polluted, whether the Roman galleries and other historical features of the landscape should be preserved in whole or only in part, whether the inhabitants lead a satisfying life or should be helped to develop etc. All these local features have been selectively chosen for attention and distanced or neared, as through a magnifying glass, by those engaged in the conflict.

The third and most important feature of the 2000 – 2010 timespan has been that the fate of the project – its commencement or cancellation – has been shaped to a significant extent by the actions of actors working with or through place features. Actors have positioned themselves around particular place elements – surface rights, houses and homes, iconic pictures or local memories – to challenge the project or take advantage of it. As a result, the struggle over place has been over each house, piece of land or person that could be made to resist or, on the contrary, to side with the project developers. This has led to a variety of shifting

alliances of actors that have swayed the prospects of developing a new mine at Roșia Montană in different directions, but without a clear resolution (e.g. Alexandrescu 2012, Alexandrescu and Baldus, 2017).

After 2010, the struggle over Roșia Montană has entered a new phase in which powerful and distant actors have taken up the main decision-making roles. Two instances are worth mentioning to illustrate the idea that the struggle over Roșia Montană has been almost entirely extricated from the local context and made to depend on abstract legal and financial considerations. The first example is the so-called “Law for Roșia Montană” (Goțiu 2013) which aimed to circumvent all legal obstacles that the project had faced since the early 2000s, and included the right to expropriate Roșia Montană inhabitants on behalf of the mining company. This would have rendered futile any form of local opposition or negotiation as the force of the state would have been brought to bear on the lives of Roșia Montană residents. The proposed law was, however, abandoned due to massive protests in several major cities and Bucharest in the fall of 2013.

The second instance occurred in 2015 when RMGC sued the Romanian state before the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) of the World Bank, claiming damages in the amount of 4.4 billion USD (Reguly 2018). The case makes now its way through the inscrutable decision-making mechanisms of the ICSID. The expectation is that if the mining company wins this legal case, the Romanian state will be forced to pay 4.4 billion USD. Will it agree to the payment while preserving Roșia Montană or will it attempt to cover part of these expenses by allowing the exploitation of gold? While the Romanian state and the public await the verdict, it is useful to go back and understand what the conflict has involved over the years and how Roșia Montană has been transformed by it.

This is certainly neither the first nor the last social scientific analysis of the case. The social science literature on Roșia Montană is rich and varied and it is instructive to classify it. One can distinguish more or less critical interpretations of the conflict. There are contributions rooted in specific theories or rather descriptive accounts of the conflict and Roșia Montană. Some analyses are grounded in field research while others are based on secondary sources. Here I propose a combination of these criteria in order to situate the present book in this rich field of research.

To further refine the classification above, it can be said that the conflict over Roșia Montană has evolved over three stages: a local and regional stage (between 2000 and 2009), a national stage (2010 until 2014) and a transnational stage (beginning in 2015). The stages are far from being neatly separated as there are overlaps between them. For example, the local phase of the conflict had elements of the transnational stage. The literature addressing this case reflects in part this trajectory, but is also subject to the specific research interests of the scholars engaged (see Table 1.1).

In the first stage, the Roșia Montană place and community were seen to play an essential role in the conflict, whether through the landscape, the history of the place, the options of the locals or their responses to the proposed project. The earliest contributions focussed on the historical heritage of Roșia Montană, especially its Roman and medieval mining galleries, and the attempts to safeguard it in the face of the proposed mine (Slotta 2004, personal communication). They included three volumes from the series entitled *Silver and Salt in Transylvania* (Slotta et al. 2001, 2002a, 2002c), published by the German Mining Museum in Bochum. Each volume included archival material on the Roșia Montană mining town and its historical gold mines, including travellers' accounts from the 18th and 19th centuries.