

The situation in the mining sector deteriorated sharply after 1989 when the political economy changed dramatically. Coal was considered too expensive, too polluting and too inefficient to make economic sense, especially for a country shrinking its public sector. After the mine began to close, the miners were forced to leave the area, and the workers were unable to sell the houses due to lack of buyers, so they simply left. Part of the state property was privatized, the other was simply closed and left to decay, which only exacerbated the spiral of decay. Those who remained in the area could not bear the cost of urban infrastructure. One of the key processes in the area was the separation of apartments and houses from the central heating system. With few customers and a huge amount of unpaid bills, local power plants reduced their activities, which meant a reduction in the amount of coal extracted from open pit mines. By shutting down the network, miners have actually reduced the chances of working stability. Therefore, the whole area, instead of coal, began to be heated with wood, which was an inversion of the transition that the socialist urbanization of the area had carried out earlier. Decarbonization in this area implied not only deurbanization, but also the formation of a hybrid type of environment in which some traditional urban features (such as apartment blocks, traffic lights, the existence of universities, etc.) coexisted with forms of rural life and accompanying economic relations. More than a hundred miners at the Lupeni mine in Valea Jiului (Jiu Valley) went on strike on February 15, 2021. It is a mine that is still functional, but is expected to close soon, as a result of negotiations with the European Union. What the miners thought about it became clear when they refused to leave the mine on the 15th after the end of the shift and declared a strike. In the following days, hundreds of miners in the region protested in solidarity with Lupeni. The immediate reason for the strike is clear. The company that employs the miners (Hunedoara Energy Complex) is in bankruptcy and has therefore been unable to pay salaries and allowances for several months. However, the situation is much more dramatic than just another strike, and the causes are systemic. Chief among them is decarbonization and the social costs of moving away from fossil fuels. Although the miners are certain victims, their protest was quickly politically instrumentalized in both old and new ways - to which I will return below.

A picture of decarbonization without an alternative economic strategy

The political decision to close the mine was made in the early years of the first post-communist government. However, politicians had to compromise with the miners when faced with their workers' combativeness. Organized groups of miners descended on Bucharest in the early 1990s, significantly changing the political life of the capital; these

events are known in Romanian as the Minerijade. From a symbol of labor unity, miners became characters of the socialist brutality of the working class. Like the rest of the socialist remnants, they too had to disappear. And they are. By 1997, approximately half of the miners had been laid off after receiving severance pay of 12 to 20 salaries. Since then, about 1,000 more mining jobs have been permanently lost each year. Romania's accession to the European Union has accelerated this process; therefore, of the 15 mines that existed in 1990, only four are open today. By 2024, these mines are expected to close in line with EU requirements, and the remaining 4,000 miners will be laid off. The miners in Lupena know this very well; they just hope to get their remaining wages on time - which seems less and less likely. The company that hires them has gone bankrupt, and its debts are only growing. Poor governance, embezzlement and objective economic constraints have taken their toll, that aspect is now irrelevant. Sooner or later it will close, and with that, coal mining will disappear.

In addition to the already existing ecological devastation of the area, the closure of the mine after a century and a half now also meant social devastation. The unemployment rate rose and life expectancy declined correlating with an increase in cases of alcoholism, domestic violence and homicide. In the absence of previous workers' solidarity and a common sense of belonging and pride, the miners failed to organize collectively, and instead negotiated individually, on a case-by-case basis. Deprived of voice and work, many chose to leave the area. Migration has become the only available option for many, whether they went west as cheap migrant workers, or returned to their home villages as farmers, and sometimes both happened. In the process, gender and family relationships have changed dramatically. Although the decarbonisation process also created jobs for women (traditionally limited to the household in mining communities) who were offered a sense of opportunity to participate in the public sphere, it still took the form of occasional and precarious, low-paid work. For many women, the industrial household has been replaced by agriculture and a completely different kind of household chores and care.

It is estimated that in the thirty years since the fall of the regime, half of the population has left the Jiu Valley. Those who remained faced specific and unforeseen challenges. The solidarity of the miners gave way to a clear distinction between those who readily accepted compensation from the state and those who, despite unfavorable conditions, remained miners until the last day. This moral conflict further changed the social structure and led to the destruction of pre-existing networks of trust and camaraderie, thus deepening the moral, social and urban decay of the area. Furthermore, mine closure was not a smooth process in terms of consequences. Although for many, especially the miners, this meant

belittling and social dislocation, it brought a nice profit to the chosen class. Thus, the development of monopolies benefited suppliers in particular – becoming the only source of materials needed for the day-to-day activities of the mine. Another way to profit from the remaining mines was to create intermediaries between the mines, their clients and the state.

This has led to increased internal differentiation and class conflict within the Jiu Valley itself that entail uneven and highly contextual consequences of decarbonization in the area. The survival mechanisms of the remaining population largely boiled down to a combination of small businesses (such as mini-markets and bars) and informal labor, such as illegal logging for men and mushroom picking for women. Decarbonization did not only mean “deskilling” (loss of working knowledge and skills), but also deurbanization and a return to a rural-like economy, but taking place in urban areas. The state’s efforts to mitigate the impact of decarbonisation were ill-conceived, poorly implemented, and tainted by corruption scandals. The mining industry involved not only mining, but also a number of other shops and institutions that emerged around it and helped social and economic reproduction: kindergartens, hospitals, cultural centers, cinemas and mountain tourism. All of this was either abandoned or privatized, as the mines were closed and the miners left the area. The state and NGOs proposed tourism as a solution for redevelopment of the area and redistribution of labor, but, compared to the required funds, investments were too low. Employees of state institutions in the area, including a university that has trained future mining engineers in the past, make up an important segment of the population with a steady income and are thus able to save a minimum of economic life from further collapse.

Anticlimatic populism

This is a broader historical and social context in which the latest protests in the Valley (as the region is abbreviated by the residents) must be understood. It is the background of the struggle for survival. However, its significance lies elsewhere, where political entrepreneurs enter the scene. The current prime minister, Florin Cătu, is a self-proclaimed Thatcherian who is currently implementing a public sector austerity plan. He spoke out against the miners’ protest, stressing that he would not allow another Minerijada to take place during his tenure. But such a scenario has never been realistic at all, due to the described collapse of the sector. His message aimed to portray the miners in the context of an old anti-communist troop of brutal miners eager to carry out a raid on the capital and ravage it. It was part of the well-known old right-wing arsenal of demonizing and dehumanizing miners as a violent, retrograde social category that deserves no help or solidarity. His speech had

the desired performative effect since, as writer Vasile Ernu noted in his newspaper columns in a local media outlet, many social media users were quick to vehemently condemn the miners.

In the context of environmental problems and attempts to rehabilitate them, prejudices against miners proved inevitable, with the climatic cost of coal extraction and combustion being particularly emphasized. This conflict is well known in other areas experiencing decarbonisation and we have already dealt locally with environmental principles during the protests to save Russia Montana in 2013, when the economic well-being of the gold mining sector stood in the way of environmental problems. Finding the right balance between jobs and the need to protect the climate is, of course, no easy task, and this kind of conflict will escalate further when, soon, decarbonisation policies (mostly related to oil and gas) begin to accelerate further. It will be interesting to find out, for example, how urban and more educated oilmen will react when faced with the decarbonisation of their industry.

In other news, it is important to note that the latest protest in Lupen has sparked a different kind of populism in Romanian politics. Diana Șoșoacă, an independent senator, is the only high-profile politician to visit the miners and speak out in their favor. Șoșoacă recently entered parliament with the far-right AUR party, but was ousted after a quarrel with the leadership. She is known as a very vocal critic of the measure of closure and legal imposition of wearing masks in public space. Her direct and confrontational style made her a favorite of television stations, and her popularity grew after her expulsion from the party. Its solidarity with the miners is part of a carefully calculated political growth. But addressing the miners, she laid the groundwork for a very coherent populism that denies climate change and reduces the blame for mine closures to local politicians she considers subordinate and servile to EU demands and other vile foreign interests. She is the first politician since the 1990s to stand up for the miners and refuse to accept mine closure as a fact that happened a long time ago. As is the case with right-wing populism, this is another example of a fake friend who promises to save workers with cheap tricks. There were vague echoes of Trampism in her recent ten-minute speech. While the proverbial dice that decide the future of miners have already been thrown, their reluctant political instrumentalization could lead to a new form of populism, 30 years after the ideological construction of these workers as poisonous remnants of communism. Miners thus remain important subjects of political disputes, while their impoverishment deepens.

Source: bilten.org