

For the past 15 years, Canadian mining firm Gabriel Resources has been trying to obtain a permit to extract 300 tonnes of gold from underneath Roșia Montană, a picturesque village in western Romania, with a population of almost 4,000 people. But today, the Romanian government has added the village and its surroundings to their official nominee list for the UNESCO world heritage site. This decision comes a few weeks after Roșia Montană was declared a site of historic interest by the Romanian Ministry of Culture, and stands as a testament to the power of peaceful protest. The story of how the government changed its mind starts with the story of the Romanian people speaking up against irresponsible corporations and environmental destruction.

In September 2013 Romania saw the biggest street protests since the 1989 Revolution. Thousands of people, mostly young people, took to the streets holding up signs saying “The corporation doesn’t make the legislation”, “Corruption = Cyanide” and “We want nature, not cyanide”. They were speaking up for Roșia Montană, a little village in the north of Romania that sits on top of a gold mine.

Since 2001, Canadian firm Gabriel Resources had been in negotiations with the Romanian government for the rights to build a cyanide gold mine in the beautiful, resource-rich area of Roșia Montană. Their plan was to relocate the local residents and to pump 12,000 tonnes of cyanide a year into an open-pit mine to extract 300 tonnes of gold. Local authorities and residents had been successfully opposing the project for years. But in August 2013, a new law was drafted which planned to grant unconstitutional rights to private companies, including the right to issue compulsory purchase orders to residents who refused to sell their houses and lands. This put Roșia Montană directly in the sights of Gabriel Resources, who would finally be able to force residents from their homes, and begin to pump tons of cyanide into the earth in the search for gold.

There was little news of the vote in the mainstream media, but social media amplified the voice of independent journalists and local NGOs, to show how Roșia Montană was at risk of losing the battle against the mining company. Discontent at this injustice grew across the country, and on September 8th 2015, 15,000 protesters marched through Bucharest, with about 5,000 more following in other cities around the country. Protests and marches were scheduled every day for weeks to follow.

The “hipster revolution”, as the media called it, was the coming of age of the Romanian civil society. Never before in Romania’s short democratic history has an issue raised so much public support and created such healthy debate amongst its citizens. The post-communist generation had united for the first time since the revolution, and had done so to rally behind an environmental cause - to protect Roșia Montană and its residents from another

Romania: From cyanide gold mine to protected historical site, how people power saved Roşia Montană

ecological disaster like the Baia Mare cyanide spill.

What can we learn from Romania's new found civil strength? That people care about injustice, and care about environmental issues. That by using new tools such as social media, we have the power to spark and spread information, and to inspire peaceful protest. We learned that we have the responsibility to hold the people in charge accountable for their decisions. And that if we take that responsibility seriously, we can drive change. The fight to save Roşia Montană happened on the streets and on the internet. It's motto was #unitisalvam - Romanian for "United, We Save". In these times of corporate greed and environmental destruction, this is a motto which can inspire us all.

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