

A #Col(lectiv)e Romanian Tragedy. A Case Study on Social Media Fighting Corruption

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Abstract

The fire occurred at the #Colectiv Club in the Romanian capital city, Bucharest, on October 31st, 2015 and caused 64 deaths. The reactions of all public institutions, which should have provided explanations to the public opinion, were delayed and incomplete. The aim of this study is to explain the role played by the social media, especially Facebook, in the events that followed the tragedy at 'Colectiv' Club. Summarizing the literature, we are going to illustrate how Romanian citizens have turned to social media as a channel which managed to: a) provide reliable information in real time about the unfortunate event, b) organize protests against the political actors held responsible and c) rally people and the medical or financial resources necessary either for the proper treatment of the people hospitalized in Romania or for moving them in hospitals abroad. The protests involving tens of thousands of people in all major cities, being directed against the political class considered corrupt were organized and promoted in the social media and led to the resignation of the government held responsible for the tragedy at the club.

Keywords: social media, anti-corruption, Romania, 2015, 2.0 protests, framing theory

1. Social Media and the Expansion of the Social Movements

The social movements are a result of the social structures which mobilized themselves through social media with the aim of emitting a claim addressed to the authority (Sava, 2014, p. 131). Social media propagates attitudes, states of mind and specific messages, in what time is concerned it happens instantaneously, concerning space - with an infinite potential and to an unlimited virtual audience. Della Porta and Mosca (2005) consider that social media is a) a logistics resource available to some collective actors who do not have other sources, b) which permits the organization and the articulation of the claims, c) informs and raises the audience's awareness and d) facilitates the identification processes in the collective actions. Social media ensures the disintermediation, permitting the direct address to the public and to the non-hierarchical networks. While using the online platforms for planning, informing and coordinating, the costs of the mobilization are the lowest.

The social movements organized in social media started to disperse worldwide in 2010. The communicational autonomy permitted by the internet helped them develop, as the government and the corporations could not control them. In the networked society the protest takes place in the online environment, in the streets of big cities, without a unique center of control, without a leader, being self-reflexive and wanting to change the state and the social values, but without taking over the political power, reconfiguring itself continuously, at the same time, in networks of local and global networks (Castells, 2013, pp. 300-302). Social media helps building a collective identity which can support the protest; this is made through maintaining the interpersonal relationships with friends, family and members of other social networks. The collective identities function as incentives which motivate the participation in the protests, offering the participants the feeling of being part of a group, of solidarity and a sense resulting from the opposition "us" versus "them" (Walgrave, Van Laer, Verhulst, Wouters, 2011).

Facebook Revolution, Twitter Revolution or the Arab Spring and Ukrainian Euromaidan are just some of the best known examples where solidarity, as a voluntary and conscious attitude was maintained, potentiated and amplified by social media (Salcudean, 2015, pp. 138-139).

Based on "Facebook effect" (David Kirkpatrick, 2010, pp.7-15), the messages on Facebook circulate rapidly, "from a person's bedroom to millions of people in the street, because Facebook's

software makes information become viral. The Facebook posts have the ability of hurrying the groups and of making a lot of people become aware of something almost simultaneously, of spreading a single issue from one person to another and from someone to many - like a virus." This viral spread of information or anger, revolt, annoyance transforms the ordinary citizens into reporters or protesters. According to the data provided by Facebrand.ro, in December 2015 Facebook had 8.300.000 users from Romania. 61, 32% of them are men and 38, 68% are women, 29,2% are 25-34 years old, 23,1% are young people which are 18-24 years old, 20,4% are 35-44 years old, 10,3% are 13-17 years old, 10,3% are 45-54 years old. So, over 50% of the users are 18-34 years old, they are young, active, being entitled to vote and they can mobilize fast.

2. Online Activism and Protests 2.0 (and) in Romania

Following the example of the political actors who started to use social media as a means of communication with the voters during and outside the electoral campaign (Pătruț, 2011; Pătruț, 2012; Pătruț, 2013; Pătruț, 2014; Pătruț, 2015a; Pătruț, 2015 b) the civil activism in Romania penetrated slowly but surely the online environment. The online communities allow the citizens to express freely and to act out of the desire to change an injustice or to make a change for the better, even if it happens in an indefinite period of time (Yang, 2009). We will present in the following line two of the most successful protests organized in social media.

2.1. University Square - January-February 2012

The street protests in the University Square in January 2012 against the reforms in the healthcare system promoted by the Boc government and supported by Basescu are the first protests in which participants were organized and rallied on social networks, especially on Facebook (Momoc, 2014, p.146). The pretext of its breakout was solidarity with the founder of the Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication (Romanian SMURD), Dr. Raed Arafat, an opponent of the liberalization of the emergency medical system, who claimed that the public system was still operating and the emergence of private operators of emergency would destabilize it. Raed Arafat resigned on January 10th, 2012, and the next day people reacted on the social networks and organized themselves into groups of supporters. The members of the online discussion groups scheduled meeting times on Facebook to protest in the markets of the major city centers - Cluj, Targu Mures, Alba Iulia, Bucharest. The first who took the streets on January 11th, were the residents of Cluj with the slogan "SMURD for us, we for SMURD".

The message posted on Facebook: "Support SMURD! The Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation is a state's obligation towards its citizens. Come today, at 19.00, with a support message to the Union Square (Matei Corvin), to express our respect and solidarity with Raed Arafat" (Goina 2012, p. 204). On January 12th, 2012 the residents of Targu Mures took to the streets with similar messages (Stoica, 2012, p. 49). On January 13th in Bucharest, several demonstrators gathered in the University Square in solidarity with Raed Arafat and on January 17th, 2012 he was recalled to the position of State Undersecretary of Health. Although Arafat agreed to return to the position of minister, the protests continued until the Boc government's resignation.

Triggered in solidarity with the SMURD service, the unexpected, spontaneous, not very organized and temporarily violent events with participants from multiple socio-economic categories gave birth to many interpretations in the (inter) national press (Stoica, 2012, pp.72-75). Very diverse and disunity messages showed protesters the "state of the nation" and the multiple problems of the country: from the health system, education, taxes or environmental protection to the corruption in the political environment or the lack of transparency of the Romanian democracy.

Making a good presentation of the protesters' messages which are associated with the problems in the Romanian political environment, Presadă (2012) grouped them as follows:

- messages sending to public goods and services: "The money for culture you spent it on drinking; We want hospitals not cathedrals; A guy of neutral gender destroyed our education; Go and bring back our ship fleet";

- messages sending to corruption: “You took big bribe from Rosia Montana; We don’t want governments run by corporations anymore; Please excuse us, we do not produce as much as you steal!”
- messages sending to political parties and politicians: “The socialists, liberals and democrats – the same filth; I want to vote for a free man!”
- messages sending to democracy and change: “Fatal error 404: Democracy not found!, Another revolution for the constitution, We want earlier elections not elections run at the same time! Those who jump want a change; Who is sad is a former political police officer!”
- messages sending to awakening: “I am/we are the new civil society; the player civil society; Thank you, Basescu, for waking me up!; I came by myself, I was not brought here by bus!”

For students and for most of the participants, the Internet and Facebook played an important role. There were hundreds of blogs and sites such as *indignati-va.ro*, *voxpública.ro* or *criticatac.ro* as well as Facebook events that called people to protest (Burean and Badescu, 2013, p.2). Starting from the data of the research conducted by the organization CeRe and quoted by Presadă (2012), at the national level, only 1% is considered to have used the Internet to get information about the protests in 2012 and 1% used Facebook as a source of information during protests. The young and educated protesters used Facebook as a means of communication but also as a means of organizing small groups and their meetings. There were Facebook and several groups / pages that were organized and coordinated their movements (*Piata Universitatii /University Square, Indignatii din Romania/ Indignados of Romania*), who managed to connect Romanians from different cities of the country or outside the country. As a tool for rallying young protesters, even Facebook has its limits: the organizers of the protests found that those who actually assisted at the protests were less than those who announced their participation online.

2.2. Save Roșia Montana Campaign

Organized horizontally on the social networking, the protesters rallied online also in early September 2013 in order to block the mining project of the Gold Corporation Canadian company for gold mining in Rosia Montana; the right groups (some radical organizations, neo-fascist) rallied against the exploitation of the natural resources of Romania, of the “Romanian gold” by the Rosia Montana Gold Corporation foreign company; the left groups (civic and environmental NGOs and feminist) rallied against the abuse of the authorities on the local community and on the environmental risks caused by using the cyanide mining technology. (Momoc, 2014, p.146)

“The Save Rosia Montana campaign” (SRMC) began in July 2002 when the Alburnus Maior Association organized a meeting of the environmental NGOs in the locality of Rosia Montana, where they took a stand against the exploitation in the open pit of the gold deposits, against the use of cyanide and against the forced displacement of the locals. The opponents of the RMGC project informed the public, activated the environmental organizations in Romania and from other European countries, internationalized the case, won the support of churches and of the scientific community, began the long series of appeals in the courts, but the project was stopped in its initial form. In order to attract the public attention to the case, the opponents found themselves forced to be creative, while the traditional media remained silent on the topic (Gotiu 2013, pp. 362-363).

Inspired by the Occupy Movement worldwide protests, a group of activists of the “Save Rosia Montana Campaign” broke into the Continental Hotel building (former New York) in Cluj the night of 6/7 November 2011, barricaded themselves inside and exposed on the balcony of the building a huge banner with the message “the revolution starts at Rosia Montana”. *Occupy Conti* was followed by similar demonstrations in Bucharest and Cluj, in universities and in front of the public television as a protest against the silence kept by the traditional media on the intervention of authorities on the occupants of the Continental Hotel (Momoc, 2014, p.146).

The media coverage of the topic and its turning into one of wide interest started in August

2011, when Basescu presented himself as a supporter of the cyanide gold mining. The opponents responded on social networks and organized flash mobs entitled “Red Card for President Basescu” in Cluj and Bucharest. The president’s public appearances on Rosia Montana attracted the mainstream media attention. If until 2011 the topic did not reach prime time, Basescu’s statements on mining and the idea of a national referendum on the issue drew the attention of the journalists from the traditional media and of the public opinion. The protests of the activists of the “Save Rosia Montana Campaign” in 2011 did not reach the small screens, although they had been shared on the social networks and become viral on the websites with user-generated content. (Gotiu 2013, p. 445).

In July 2013, the Prime Minister Victor Ponta included the mining project in the investment program of the Government. In late August, the Ponta government placed responsibility on the MPs, asking the Parliament to adopt a special law for the exploitation of Rosia Montana. After posting the information on Facebook, the members of several local online communities announced the organization of protests on September 1 in Cluj, Bucharest, Timisoara, Iasi. The movement entitled “United We Save Rosia Montana” rallied online groups of citizens horizontally in a series of protests and peaceful marches in Bucharest and nationally. At the largest rally on September 15th, 2013 around 20,000 people took the streets. The protests were also held in other parts of Europe, about 150-200 Romanian activists protesting in London. The evening protests involved blocking streets, using percussion instruments, songs and sitting down on the road.

The “Save Rosia Montana” Campaign is seen as the biggest civic movement in Romania since 1990 and these protests were the largest protests in Romania since the events of 1990. The case of Rosia Montana was considered the biggest corruption scandal in the recent Romanian history. (Klein, 2013). The protesters were active both online and offline, they created a hybrid behavior which combines the viral activity from the online environmen with the manifestations which happen outside, on the streets. The organization and the mobilization of the protesters were made on Facebook with the help of the pages which promoted street manifestations by making it viral on information brochures, on promotional material, on open letter and online petitions, by using hashtags, by creating cultural events. More than that, offline activities also helped: concerts, film projections, craft workshops, flashmobs. The protests dedicated to Roșia Montană benefited from the support of online communities (“United We Save”, “United We Change” and “United We Save Roșia Montană”) which were created on Facebook. These were the most important ways of communication and a lot of messages and information about the protest were posted there.

3. Framing and Collective Action Frames in the Social Movement

Linked to Erving Goffman's name, the term “frame” was established as being a *schemata of interpretation* (Goffman, 2974) of the events placed by media into a certain perspective, according to “an idea or a central organizing story line, which gives it meaning” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). The frame was then defined as being “...the selection and the visibility of certain aspects of a reality, having the aim of proposing a certain definition to the presented problem, a certain causative interpretation, a moral evaluation or/and expressing recommendations concerning the presented aspects” (Entman, 1993). For Entman, the frame is a mechanism of influencing the public opinion through the cognitive mechanism named the flow of the amplified influence by creating some mental links between different situations, images, persons. Precisely, “the frames draw the attention upon certain aspects of reality, while maintaining other aspects in obscurity, which produces different reactions in the audience” (Entman, 2003), their coming to certain interpretations, evaluations and solutions. Another important theoretical contribution belongs to T. Gitlin who defines the frames as being “patterns of cognition, interpretation, presentation, selection, emphasis and exclusion of some particular themes” (Gitlin, 2003). In this case, the frame represents a way of structuring the elements which form a media discourse, a particular scheme of assembling the information, the sequence of facts, the tipology of the characters involved, a scheme which will determine the viewer to process the media information in a certain way. Through frames, the journalist sets the attributes of the situation and the way of interpreting what he presents us.

The numerous frame analysis consecrated more types of frames of interpretation applied to media discourse. In terms of attributing the responsibility for the existent public problems, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) propose the distinction between episodic frames and thematic frames: "the episodic frame highlights concrete events which illustrate particular subjects, while the thematic frame show individual or collective evidence". De Vreese (2005) makes the difference between the resulting frames created within a specific context of themes or events and the predefined frames specific to a professional field. N. Prepelea (2007) proposes the classification of the frames in universal media frames and local media frames and demonstrates the way in which the power of defining a frame becomes a political power. From Karin Puhlinger, Urs Dahinden, Patrick Rademacher (2008) we find out that no matter what themes the frames organize, the basic frames are: the conflicting frame, which presents the opposition between different particular interests which exist in every society, the economic frame, which presents the theme from the economical point of view, the progress frame that shows the themes within the positive context of the scientific and technological progress, the ethical, moral and judicial frame and the frame of personalization, which present any theme from the perspective of those who are directly affected by them. Present in all the stages of the mass communication, the frames structure the information and help in the processes of selection and presentation of the information, being selective points of view over particular themes or events.

In the study of social movements, the frame theory was used, even from the 2000, in order to explain the way in which ideas and meanings contribute to the development, the diffusion and the functioning of the (counter)mobilization in the collective actions (Benford & Snow, 2000). The effective mobilization is made only with credible stories and the activists of the social movements are signifying agents involved in offering different meanings of the social world (Sava, 2014). These collective frames are negotiated expressions of the meaning, they are social schemes which guide the action and support the discursive process which accompanies the action.

The most important functions of framing are diagnosis, prognosis and motivation. Diagnostic framing summarizes the invocation of injustice, the finding of a victim and the assignment of a responsibility / guilt for the discovered injustice. Then comes the prognostic framing which emphasizes the importance of finding the necessary solutions for correcting the injustice; and the motivational framing which ensures the motivation for joining the ameliorative collective action (Snow and Benford, 1988). The social movements are actively involved in manipulation of the cultural frames, so that they can achieve their strategic purposes. Gamson (1992, pp. 53-76) presents an alternative set of collective action frames comprising identity, injustice and agency. The identity frame identifies who is responsible for the injustice, often employing negative stereotypes to present the perpetrator. The injustice frame would present acts, social conditions, or aspects of life that are unjust, intolerable and deserving corrective action (Benford & Snow, 2000).

4. Corruption kills #Colectiv or about the mobilization in the anti-corruption battle

4.1. Presentation of the socio-political context

In the evening of August 30th, 2015, there was a fire in a night club called "Colectiv" in Bucharest and 64 people died. The public opinion considered that the tragedy from the club was caused by the incompetence and the corruption of the Romanian political system. With the slogan "Corruption kills!" Romanians transformed the sadness and the frustration into solidarity and responsibility, getting out in the street by the thousands in the country (Bucuresti, Constanta, Timisoara, Cluj, Galati, Sibiu and Iasi) as well as in the diaspora (Paris, Londra, Roma, Madrid, Berlin and New York) and organizing the biggest protests in the last 26 years. The most important discontent of the protesters was the way in which the authorities granted the certificates and the operating licences to public places, pointing then to the whole political class which was accused of corruption and which was made directly responsible for the social problems which the Romanian

society faces (Sultanescu, 2016). On the 4th of November 2015, the Prime Minister Victor Ponta together with the Romanian Government, but also with the mayor of the 4th district of Bucharest, Cristian Popescu Piedone, resigned. The protests continued the next days in the majority of cities in the country. The protesters requested respect, correctness and protection from the political class: "Why are we here? Because on the 30th of October some young people went to a concert and never came back", "Because of a system in which white authorizations are given in exchange for black money", "We want to have immunity to disasters, we do not want them to have political immunity", "We want welfare, not manipulation". As a consequence of the ample street protests, a new government made up by technocrats and lead by Dacian Cioloș was implemented in Romania (Grigoriu, 2016).

4.2. Case study: Corupția ucide-#Colectiv, 2015

A few days after the fire in "Colectiv", in social media, precisely on Facebook, appeared a lot of pages and groups which offered information about the tragedy, its causes and its consequences: *Corupția ucide - #Colectiv* (<https://www.facebook.com/ucide.coruptia/>), *Ajutor Colectiv* (<https://www.facebook.com/ajutorcolectiv/>), *R.I.P. - Colectiv, Împreună rezistăm, Ajutor Colectiv*, *Marsul Tacerii Colectiv*, *Colectiv Pentru Viitor*, *Revoluția #Colectiv*, *Solidaritate cu Romania #Colectiv*. All these pages and groups created on Facebook facilitated the building of an alternative communication space and of a critical, anti-system discourse supported by a civil society which was more and more consolidated.

In this study we will examine the frames used by the most active group on Facebook which assumed the role of the organizer of the protests in social media. The data which attest the activity of the group *Corupția ucide - #Colectiv* are taken from Facebook Monitor and are given in the table below.

Table 1. #Coruptia ucide - Facebook Account Insights

	Facebook Account Insights					
	Active fans	Fans base	Fan Page Interaction	Content	Talking about	Share of Voice
#Coruptia ucide	890	10421	1727 likes, 122 comments, 225 shares	51 posts, 21 links, 21 photos, 1 video, 7 statuses	39	1130

In order to find out the answer to the question "What protest frames did organizers use?" we watched all the posts from *Corupția ucide - #Colectiv* (<https://www.facebook.com/ucide.coruptia/>) between 31st of October and 4th of December 2015. In order to analyse the posted content, we used, as a research method, the quantitative content analysis and the results are shown in the Table 2.

Table 2. The results of the quantitative content analysis

1.	Diagnostic / Identity-Injustice Frame	28%
	The responsables for the tragedy in "Colectiv":	
	• The owners of the nightclub "Colectiv"	2%
	• The mayor of the 4th sector in Bucharest	3%
	• The Government and the corrupt political class	5%
	Victims: dead or hurt young people, their grieving families	
	Injustice and problems:	
	• Death of 64 people at a rock concert	4%
	• Lack of clear regulations concerning the prevention of the fire or not applying them	2%
	• The incompetence or corruption inside the public institutions which should	2%

	regulate and/or prevent such tragic accidents	
	• Betrayal of the citizens' trust	2%
	• The generalized insecurity of the citizens	2%
	• The incapacity of the Romanian health system of managing such crisis situations	5%
	• Communication of the political authority in Romania which lacks the transparency	1%
2	Prognostic Frame	46%
	• Changing the actual political class and identifying new criteria for a careful selection of the future politicians	20%
	• Establishing more harsh anticorruption laws and institutions	18%
	• Reducting the privileges and increasing the punishment of corrupt dignitary	6%
	• Reducting the number of the members of the parliament, giving up on political immunity, on the vote in two rounds in the local elections, on the postal vote	2%
3	Motivational / Agency Frame	26%
	• Participating at protests and at consultations with different civic organizations and with the President of Romania	11%
	• Avoiding such tragedies in the future through improving the function of the public institutions in Romania	9%
	• Creating a new political party	1%
	• Offering psychological, financial, legal help to the families of the victims	4%
	• Taking transparent political decisions after consulting with the citizens	1%

5. Conclusions

Facebook was the most important source of information for Romanians who wanted to find out in real-time details about the tragedy and about the mobilization which took place around the incident, becoming an organizer of volunteer centers, but also a motor of street protests (Grigoriu, 2016). The messages transmitted through social media contributed to the awareness of the suffering and of the collective responsibility, to the mobilization of the netizens for direct actions and for street protests against the corruption of the political class.(see annex 1).

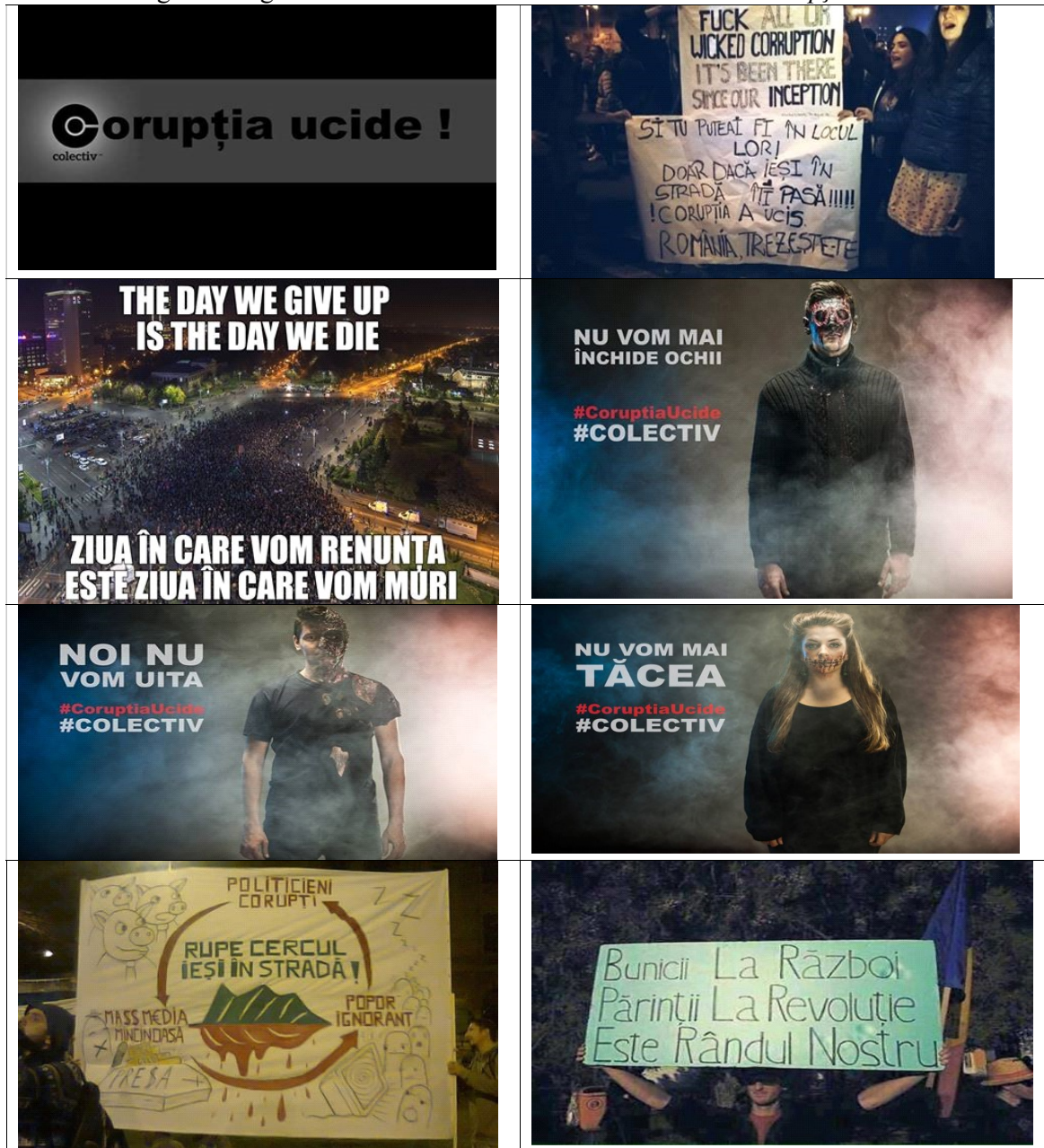
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Annex 1. Images calling on action taken from the Facebook account *Corupția ucide* - #Colectiv



(Source : <https://www.facebook.com/ucide.coruptia/?fref=ts>)