Chapter 5

Public Space, Memory and Protest during Post-Socialist Transformation: The

Emergence of *University Square* (*Piaţa Universităţii*), Bucharest as a Space of Protest

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Introduction

From 'Orange' and 'Ukrainian' revolutions in Maidan Square, Kiev in 2009 and 2014 (Beissinger 2011; Way 2014), through marches supporting tolerance and equality for lesbians, gay men and other sexual dissidents in Polish cities (Binnie and Klesse 2013; Binnie 2014), to residents of St. Petersburg, Russia exercising their 'right to the city' to protest against inappropriate urban development (Dixon 2010), and citizens of Belgrade/Beograd resisting the Milosevic regime in 1996-7 (Jansen 2001), public space has become a vital arena for various forms of protest in post-socialist cities across the former Eastern Europe and Soviet Union. These apparently 'public' spaces within cities have come to play a central role in complex processes of developing civil society and democracy in the context of the post-authoritarian, or even semi-authoritarian, socio-political systems which emerged after 1989-91. However, while much research has worked to unpick the role of urban public space in various movements espousing a 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1968, 1996; Mitchell 2003; Harvey, 2008) and international social movements such as 'Occupy' (Kilibarda 2012; theme issue of *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies*, 2012, 5; Uitermark and Nicholls 2012) in a Western, capitalist context, relatively little is known about how public space has emerged as a site of protest in a post-socialist setting, even though some of those societies could now be considered capitalist and even 'Western'. As Dixon (2006) suggests, such struggles are a part of post-socialist societies' efforts to create new polities and identities.

This chapter therefore presents a case study of the historical development of protest in *Piaţa Universităţii* (*University Square*), in the Romanian capital Bucharest, in order to explore the role that urban public space plays in society and politics in a post-socialist context. From its origins as a public space in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century under the Romanian monarchy, the square underwent various changes during the Communist period

and then again after the Romanian 'revolution' of 1989, as subsequent political regimes sought to shape the meanings attached to this space and as it became associated with major historical events linked to protests against both Communist and post-socialist regimes. And since 1989 these processes in this one public space have also been influenced to different degrees by larger-scale processes of a 'return to Europe' and European Union (EU)-accession, globalisation, global economic crisis in 2008-9 and the growth of international protest movements. In this context, the chapter addresses some key questions about post-socialist public space, including: what factors shaped particular public spaces as spaces of protest during Communism, the fall of state-socialism and then post-socialism; how did the particular circumstances of the fall of Communism shape the nature of public space as a space for protest under post-socialism; and what does this say about the role of public space in post-socialist civil society and democracy?

As work on post-socialist urban spaces has explored, there are a range of questions to be addressed about the inter-relationship between civil society, protest and democracy as expressed and performed in public space (Way 2014), to which could be added the idea that the nature of such events in public space can also say a lot about the nature of post-socialist governing regimes. Writing as early in the process of post-socialist transformation as 1993, Bernhard (1993, 326) concluded that 'the successful democratization of Soviet-type regimes will include the reconstitution of a civil society as a means to curtail state autonomy and as a basis for a new system of interest representation', and that this will vary between differently configured civil societies.

Mitchell following Lefebvre (1968) argues that the playing out of the relationship between civil society and democracy is inherently spatial, as publicly expressed concerns over the 'right to the city' are often about power struggles between those seeking to impose (or resist) order and control over (public) space, and 'that order must be explicitly geographic: it centres on the control of the streets and the question of just *who* has *the right to the city*' (Mitchell 2003, 17). Mitchell and Staeheli (2005, 798) advance this point further by arguing that 'public space is where dissent becomes visible. The question is, then: What are the conditions under which visibility becomes possible?' In their view, publics (and civil society and democracy) are in part constituted in and through public space, and 'The politics of public space, therefore, can shape the nature of politics in public space.' Here, the politics of public space refers to how it is controlled, for example by legislation and policing practices, and how this shapes the ways it can be used to express dissent.

However – without wishing to consign everything that happens in public space to a simplistic category of 'resistance' – this politics is also about how the streets and urban public space form both a *specific* terrain and a representational space in which power can be contested (Jansen 2001; Routledge 1997). As Jansen asks about the 1996-7 pro-democracy protests on the streets of Beograd:

> Why did they come about when they did, and why were they concentrated in cities, and especially in the Serbian capital Beograd? How did this specific locale, location and sense of place…inform and reflect the character, the dynamics and tactics of the events? What kind of place-specific discursive practice of protest was developed..?

> Jansen (2001, 38)

As Uitermark and Nicholls (2012) reveal in their analysis of the international 'Occupy' movement from 2011, its relative success and sustainability in different cities relied heavily on whether Occupy activists could connect with local activist networks and align themselves with their *local* concerns. Urban public spaces are dynamic and how they operate is shaped by local factors in combination with the national and trans-/international. Their ability to sustain their role as loci of protest owes much to their specific accreted discourses, values, meanings and affective registers and how these are produced and reproduced through processes such as memory.

To address these issues the chapter first briefly sketches the historical development of *University Square* in the period before the establishment of Romania as a Communist country (up to 1947) and then during the state-socialist period (1947-89) itself, outlining its role in the urban morphology and socio-political life of the city and the nation. The next section then explores the role of the square in the events that led to the downfall of Romanian Communism, the 'revolution' of 1989. These events, and those which quickly followed in the form of the also violent *Mineriadă* in 1990, were crucial in shaping how *University Square* worked, and continues to work, as a space for protesting against regimes. Throughout this account we also highlight how it was not simply the events themselves, but also how they were subsequently memorialised in this space and how they shaped people's memories, that make this space significant as a site of post-socialist protest. We then conclude the analysis with a consideration of how University Square, having become associated with protest through these events, has continued to be a site of protest against different post-socialist governments and specific issues, but at the same time is also a public space in which other events are celebrated, suggesting a hybrid space in which many issues and emotions are addressed, not just protest. The chapter concludes by summarising the key characteristics of

this urban space and its place in Romania's post-socialist transformation, particularly the relationship between civil society and the state.

The Origins of *Piaţa Universităţii* and the Square in the Communist Period

Piaţa Universităţii is a major intersection in the centre of Bucharest, but the name is also loosely used to refer to a larger irregular area surrounding the intersection itself (see Figure 1). The origins of the square date from the early twentieth century and had little to do with notions of claiming public space for protest, but a lot to do with the state seeking to control public space to project their imaginings of 'the nation'. At this time Romania was a monarchy and had gone through a period from the late nineteenth century of seeking to challenge predominant external perceptions of the country as underdeveloped, even backward, and as peripheral to Europe, both geographically and culturally. Romania had also already gained an image as a rather liminal space, between the West and the East and not clearly belonging to either, but also between the civilised world and the supernatural, fuelled in the West particularly by the popular success of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In response, the first Romanian King, Carol I, initiated a process of nation-building which aimed to place Romania as a modern nation-state firmly located within Europe (Boia 2001).

It was in this context that the intersection was created during the early twentieth century during an energetic period of modernisation of the city which, after 1878, had become the capital of independent Romania. The city's leaders were keen to remake Bucharest into a modern European city and, given Romania's historical and cultural allegiance with France, the principal inspiration was Paris. In particular, Haussmann's grand boulevards in Paris were icons of modernity and Romania was eager to imitate them. Thus a major West-East

boulevard was completed in 1895 (Giurescu 1976) and named after King Carol I and his wife

Elisabeta (see Plate 5.1). In the early twentieth century a North-South boulevard was added,

with the intersection between them resembling Haussmann's '*grand croisée'* in Paris (Celac

et al. 2005). To add to the symbolism, Bucharest's main university building (opened in 1869)

stood at the intersection and a number of other grand buildings were constructed around the

square.

< FIGURE 5.1 SOMEWHERE AROUND HERE >

The intersection was therefore constructed as a statement of modernity and of the national

identity which Romania was seeking to cultivate and project, and these efforts were further

emphasized by efforts to make it a place of national memory. Four statues of important

historical and cultural figures were erected on the south side of the intersection, while a statue

of the Liberal politician and nation-builder I.C. Brătianu was placed in the centre in 1903.

Brătianu's name was also allocated to the North-South boulevard, while the intersection was

named *Piaţa Brătianu*. This area became the setting for occasional state ceremonies such as

an annual military parade, attended by King Carol I on the anniversary of his coronation. It

was also a popular location for informal political meetings and protests in the period of the

monarchy, particularly around the statues on the southern part of the square (Costescu 2005),

though this space was not unique in this sense in Bucharest at this time. However, the main

location for public gatherings was *Piaţa Palatului* (*Palace Square*), half a kilometre away,

where the royal palace was located. Although not planned as such, *Piaţa Brătianu* effectively

became the *de facto* centre of the city (Boia 2001), something that was institutionalised in

1938 when the 'Kilometre 0' monument (the point from which all distances within the

country are measured) was erected nearby. Rather than being strongly associated with protest,

in this period the area became important as a key part of the social life of the city. It was a

place for promenading, particularly on a Sunday, and meeting friends for talking about life, politics and business over a beer or a coffee. Intellectual discussions took place here, as did informal student gatherings, but also cultural events, such as impromptu performances by Maria Tanase or Constantin Tanase. These took place particularly in the southern part of the square around the statues, creating a micro-social geography of the square that persists to the present day.

Following the declaration of the Romanian People's Republic in December 1947 a number of changes were made to the intersection with the intention of de-commemorating the monarchy and instead, commemorating historical figures considered exemplary revolutionaries by the socialist regime, in order to signal a new narrative for the Romanian nation. Brătianu's statue was removed (although the others were retained) and the two boulevards were renamed (Light et al. 2002). The intersection was initially named *Piaţa Bălcescu* (after one of the leaders of the 1848 Wallachian revolution). Plans were developed in the 1950s for a form of 'systematisation' of the square intended to create a new public plaza, although building work did not start until the late 1960s (Ioan 2008). The 22-story modernist Intercontinental Hotel opened on the north side of the intersection in 1971, followed by the nearby National Theatre in 1973 (which was given a new façade in the 1980s). In the late 1980s the tram lines which ran along the north-south boulevard were removed when the *Universitate* metro station opened and the intersection was formally renamed *Piaţa Universităţii* around the same time. Overall the square was partly remodelled along modernist socialist principles and to promote the achievement of the socialist state, such as technological progress as evidenced by the metro.

However, the cluttered and irregular space was of little use to the socialist regime as a venue for public meetings, parades and displays which, instead, took place in larger public spaces in other parts of the city. However, *University Square* was still associated with forms of protest in two main ways. First, although not suitable for state-organised protests itself, such performances usually involved large-scale events which moved through the city. *University Square* was thus often part of such protests in the sense that they started there or paraded through it between larger sites such as stadia on the way to spaces held to be more significant by the regime, notably the nearby large *Piaţa Palatului* (*Palace Square*), where the Romanian Communist Party had its headquarters. These *mitinguri* were not protests *against* the state, but were organised *by* the socialist state as protests against the wider 'enemies' of Communism – the themes adopted for these events included pollution, inequality, unemployment (since in a socialist country such a thing did not exist by presumption), nuclear weapons, respecting territorial 'integrity' and internal affairs. These themes were chosen to represent the superiority of the socialist state over capitalism, and increasingly so the population could show 'support' for the leadership. Events were organized by the *propagandisti*, members of the Propaganda Department within the *Partidul Comunist Român* (PCR or Romanian Communist Party) and to begin with were voluntarily attended by the population. However, as the population became increasingly disaffected with the regime organized protests such as these were increasingly held in sports grounds and arenas where crowd control and surveillance was more manageable and larger-scale and people were 'strongly encouraged' to participate, which often meant that they were transported there from, for example, work places. They became less common after 1980 and at the same time from 1983 gathering in *University Square* was actively discouraged, including by the university authorities who suggested that groups of students did not

associate there. The use of *University Square* for gatherings and any form of debate decreased considerably.

However, this did not mean that all forms of relating to the square, and even protest, ceased entirely. In everyday life and mundane activities citizens develop complex relationships with urban landscapes, which may not mirror what regimes intended. Thus during this time the square consolidated its status in the imagination of Bucharesters in a variety of ways as the symbolic and emotional heart of the city. The presence of the university meant that this was a lively and energetic social space for young people and students. At least in the early years of the Communist regime it remained a place for discussion, debate, exchange of ideas and occasional public protests among the Bucharest intelligentsia, not particularly different from in pre-Communist times. The part of the square to the north of the university was (and remains) a popular place for friends to meet. A particular landmark in the square was the large 'University Clock' dating from the 1920s. Throughout the socialist era this was a popular meeting point among young people: to ask (or be asked) to meet at the 'University Clock' was a clear request for a date. In various ways the square became embedded in the emotional lives and geographies of Bucharesters as a place associated (sometimes nostalgically) with youth, freedom and opportunity, and not simply projections of the nation or the values of socialism. Indeed, in the early years of the regime it formed a space in which students met and debated socialist principles.

However, again as disenchantment with the regime grew the square and in particular the areas around it became more associated with protest, but not the kind of open protest in public space which will be discussed below. As the use of public space even for *mitinguri*

declined, and even gathering in groups was discouraged, protest took a different form. From the early 1970s, any form of gathering, social or political, was a chance to carefully criticise the regime, not directly, but through the use of humour and jokes which subtly spoke against Ceauşescu and the regime more generally, though always with a watchful eye for *Securitate* informers. It also became a way of protesting through the careful sharing of news about the failings and excesses of the regimes. Not everyone knew about such things, and some people were informed by *Radio Free Romania*, and sharing stories became a way of resisting the regime. Increasingly, however, such practices could not be undertaken in public space, but locations around *University Square* became significant for this form of resistance. The university building was briefly a site of meditation meetings, readings and commentaries by a group called *Meditatia Transcedentala*, who used exchange of ideas, meditation and oblique references to criticise the regime, eventually leading to their being removed from their jobs and sent into 'production' (factories) or arrested. Their persecution became well known throughout Romania, fuelling further guarded protest, but not in a form which manifested itself by taking to the streets, until the events of December 1989.

Piaţa Universităţii as a space of protest and remembrance after 1989

Thus *Piaţa Universităţii* was established originally as an expression in the capital city of Romania's desires to be seen as modern, progressive and European, a set of values which the Communist regime tried to supplant by renaming and changing the landscape of the square. In the pre-War and Communist periods it was already a site associated with protest, but to a relatively small degree. As Romania's Communist regime became increasingly hard-line under the Ceauşescu regime (1965-89) public protest was suppressed. However, *University Square* was to become a key site within the city associated with dissidence, resisting regimes and protest through events and practices which developed during the violent overthrow of

Communism in 1989 and the subsequent events of 1990. These events, and the way that they were subsequently memorialised, played a key role in shaping the memories and identity of the square as a terrain and representational space of protest.

On 21 December, 1989 Nicolae Ceauşescu, Romania's President and Communist leader, was jeered and heckled as he tried to address a public rally in nearby *Piaţa Palatului* (*Palace Square*). This large square was located in front of the Communist Party Headquarters building and was used for large-scale staged rallies, such as the one the regime had called to try and quell increasing dissent. However, after the meeting restless crowds did not linger but headed towards *Piaţa Universitătii* (which was already seen as the emotional heart of the city) to join others already gathering there. As citizens started to protest the security forces opened fire. These confrontations continued throughout the day and night and at one point a barricade of cars was built across *Bulevardul Bălcescu* and set alight. The security services responded with further brutality so that by the end of the night 49 demonstrators had been killed in *Piaţa Universităţii* and a further 463 wounded (Siani-Davies 2005). The following day as crowds stormed the Communist Party Headquarters in *Piaţa Palatului* Ceauşescu was forced to flee by helicopter (he was later captured and executed). A group calling itself the National Salvation Front assumed power in the name of the people. There followed three days of open conflict on the streets of Bucharest, apparently between the army (which had turned to side with the revolution) and forces loyal to Ceauşescu. *Piaţa Universităţii* witnessed little further action during the revolution but remained in the popular imagination as the trigger point, where the first lives were lost in the struggle to overthrow Ceauşescu.

Thus, in early 1990, *Piaţa Universităţii* became an important site of remembrance for the events of December 1989 and those that died fighting the regime. Improvised ephemeral memorials, wooden crosses, flowers and candles (Beck 1993) were placed there by the families of those who had died and other well-wishers. A small, previously unnamed part of *Piaţa Universităţii* located alongside the University and Architecture School, where many people died on the first night of the revolution, was later renamed *Piaţa 21 Decembrie 1989* and here a number of more permanent memorials were placed in the form of small and unobtrusive plaques and crosses with simple inscriptions such as 'For the heroes of the Revolution, 21-22 December 1989' and 'Here they died for freedom, 21-22 December 1989'. Significantly, these were informal and spontaneous acts of remembrance that were initiated by ordinary citizens and non-state organisations rather than by the state. In *Bulevardul Bălcescu*, which runs past *Piaţa 21 Decembrie 1989*, one of a number of much older stone crosses was inscribed by a local painter with the text 'To the heroes of the revolution'. A large wooden cross was also erected here by a group representing those participating in the revolution with the blessing of the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

What is key about these practices commemorating the revolution in *Piaţa Universităţii* is that they were, and continue to be, undertaken independently of the state authorities. By contrast, 'official' commemoration of the revolution has centred on *Piaţa Revoluţiei* (*Revolution Square* - the renamed *Piaţa Palatului*). Here a monument was erected in front of the former Communist Party building in 1990 and a second, larger memorial was inaugurated in 2005. While the practices of memorialisation in *Piaţa Revoluţiei* are shaped by the state to remember the 'revolution' as a key event overthrowing Communism, the commemorations in *Piaţa Universităţii* focus on the individuals who died in the revolution rather than the event itself. These are deathscapes (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010) in which private grief is

publically displayed through smaller, individual and highly personalised forms of memorialisation. Significantly, official and popular commemorations are very different in form, make use of public space in different ways, and have quite separate geographies. Though *Piaţa Revoluţiei* and *Piaţa Universităţii* are closely located public spaces in the city, the performances of memory which take place in them and the emotional and affective geographies which adhere to them are significantly different, something which continues to shape how *University Square* functions as a public space today.

Moreover, *Piaţa Universităţii*'s distinctiveness was further emphasized by traumatic events which followed the revolution. By early 1990 it was apparent that Romania had not made a decisive break with communism. Instead, it was clear that the National Salvation Front (NSF), which had taken power on behalf of the people, was dominated by former members of the Communist *nomenclatura* whose commitment to reform was unconvincing. Following the NSF's announcement of its intention to stand in the May 1990 elections students and young people occupied *Piaţa Universităţii* in a protest camp which quickly grew in size and popularity. The NSF convincingly won the elections (with 67% of the vote) and its leader Ion Iliescu (a former member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party) was elected President. This provoked further protest by students so that Iliescu resorted to violence. On 14th June 1990 thousands of miners were brought to Bucharest on specially chartered trains and told that Romania's new democracy was under attack from anarchists, deviants and foreign agents camped in *Piaţa Universităţii*. The miners marched through Bucharest and on reaching the square savagely attacked the protesters and ransacked the University, with the most brutal violence occurring in *Piaţa 21 Decembrie*. According to government figures seven people died but the actual total is believed to be in the hundreds. This shocking event – which became known as the *Mineriadă* (literally 'Miners' Rage') -

demonstrated that the post-Ceauşescu regime was as willing as its predecessor to use violence against its citizens.

This led to a further layer of meaning and commemoration developing in *University* Square. A diverse range of memorials have been placed in the square to commemorate the young people killed in the *Mineriadă*. A marble cross in front of the National Theatre bears the text 'In memory, June 1990', alongside a monument dating from 1998 resembling a Romanian 'milepost' (Antonovici 2009) declaring the site to be the 'Kilometre Zero' of freedom and democracy in Romania and a 'Zone free of neocommunism'. This both alludes to the nearby Kilometre Zero monument (as the literal centre of the nation-state) and to a slogan from the 1990 protests when students declared the NSF to be 'neocommunists'. The university building in *Piaţa 21 Decembrie* bears a memorial plaque with the inscription 'Here students and lecturers fought for freedom and civil rights in December 1989 and April-June 1990'. In the centre of *Piata 21 Decembrie 1989* is a metal cross erected by a local artist, Constantin Popescu. It bears the text 'For the anti-communist heroes' and invites passers-by to place a flower in memory of those who died. The cross is regularly cared for and repainted, apparently by the painter himself. The wall of the Architecture School opposite was extensively graffitied with protest slogans throughout the 1990s (the graffiti were finally cleared in 2001 when the Social Democratic Party, successor to the NSF, was in power). Even today protest graffiti regularly appear in and around the square, some of which link this space to other instances of state repression, such as 'Rangoon 2009', making it to some extent also a site of transnational protest.

Thus, in addition to being a terrain of protest, *Piaţa Universităţii* is also a highly significant place of memory in Bucharest, a significant representational space (Lefebvre 1991). It is a site associated with state-sponsored violence against the civilian population by the communist regime and a place where a supposedly post-Communist government used similar appalling violence against those who questioned its legitimacy. Indeed, it has the status of a 'sacred space' in post-socialist Romania (Beck 1993; Antonovici 2009), and one which reveals much about the relationships between civil society and the state in post-socialist Romania. As noted above, the state on the one hand, and individuals and civil society on the other, commemorate these events in different ways and in different public spaces in the city. The post-Ceauşescu state has always had an ambivalent relationship with *Piata Universităţii*, particularly when the NSF and its successors were in power (1990-96 and 2000-4). Unsurprisingly, the state has not become involved in commemorating these events in *Piaţa Universităţii*, and state-led attempts at commemoration in *Piaţa Revoluţiei* are largely ignored (or even actively ridiculed) by most Romanian citizens. The state has made no attempt to reinscribe the meanings of *University Square* (apart from removing graffiti) or to intervene with the alternative, personal acts of commemoration. Instead, *Piaţa Universităţii* – and in particular *Piaţa 21 Decembrie 1989* – has become an informal but powerful site of 'countermemory' i.e. unofficial or unauthorised practices of remembrance which may directly challenge official or elite attempts to construct collective memory (Goldberg et al. 2006). It represents an attempt to rebut the efforts of the political elite to shape what is remembered and how (Legg 2005; 2007). *Piaţa 21 Decembrie 1989* is a place which reminds ordinary Bucharesters that the deaths of December 1989 did not bring about the desired political change. This tension between official and popular memory, and between different spaces of memory, was further apparent during the 20th anniversary of the revolution in 2009.

Official ceremonies unfolded in *Piaţa Revoluţiei*, but it was in *Piata Universităţii* that former revolutionaries and Bucharesters gathered to remember the event.

Piaţa Universităţii and protest beyond the revolution and *Mineriadă*

The events of the 1989 revolution and the 1990 *Mineriadă*, and the ways in which they were subsequently commemorated and remembered, thus played a significant role in shaping *Piaţa Universităţii* as a space of protest symbolic of the continued tension between the state and civil society in attempts to develop Romania as a democratic nation-state. And since those events the square has continued to play an important role in the capital both as a terrain of protest and a representational space for attempts to consolidate post-Communist Romanian politics and identity.

In terms of Romania's post-socialist political development, *University Square* also became a site of broader resistance to the former communist elite who dominated the Social Democratic Party. In 1996, Emil Constantinescu (a professor at Bucharest University and representative of the centre-right opposition coalition) defeated Iliescu in the presidential elections. Following victory, it was to *Piaţa 21 Decembrie 1989* that he came to address his jubilant supporters. In July 1997, President Clinton, accompanied by Constantinescu, addressed an enthusiastic crowd of young Romanians in *Piaţa Universităţii* and acknowledged the sacrifices for freedom that had taken place there. In later parliamentary election campaigns centre-right parties were keen to appropriate the symbolic capital which is attached to the square as a space of opposition to the former communists who dominated political life in the early 1990s. For example, in the run-up to the 2004 elections, the centre-

right 'Justice and Truth' party erected a tent in the square and made it the centre of their election campaigning.

More recently, the association of *Piaţa Universităţii* with opposition to the successors of the Romanian Communist Party was apparent during the presidential elections of November 2014. After the first round of voting, *Piaţa Universităţii* was the focus of repeated demonstrations and protests when it became apparent that large numbers of Romanians working abroad had been unable to cast their votes (something interpreted by the protesters as an attempt by the Social Democratic Party to manipulate the final result in favour of its own candidate). After the second round of voting, when exit polls predicted that the Social Democrat candidate (widely expected to win) had been defeated by the centre-right candidate Klaus Iohannis (a Transylvanian German) jubilant crowds immediately gathered in *Piaţa Universităţii*, and it was at this square that Iohannis later came to greet his supporters.

More broadly, since 1990 *Piaţa Universităţii* has been a site for diverse performances of freedom and resistance that have reinforced its role as the key symbolic space in Bucharest, associated with celebration as well as protest, though the choice of *University Square* as a site of celebration is also a tacit rejection of official, state-led attempts to make *Piaţa Revoluţiei* the symbolic heart of the capital and the nation. Indeed, Antonovici (2009) argues that it is *the* place where Bucharesters feel they can express themselves freely. On some occasions the square is a place for public celebration in a way which recalls the euphoria of the 1989 revolution. For example, when Romania played England in the 2000 European Football Championship, the match was shown live on a giant screen in *Piaţa Revoluţiei*. Romania won the match and, on the final whistle, the crowd did not linger in *Piaţa Revoluţiei* but instead

headed as one to *Piaţa Universităţii* where a large crowd gathered in the square in a joyful celebration.

Piaţa Universităţii was also an important location for Romania's celebrations when it joined the EU on 1 January 2007. For Romania, joining the EU finally represented a decisive break with the communist past and the culmination of difficult political and economic reforms in the post-Ceauşescu era. There was no better place than *Piaţa Universităţii* to demonstrate that Romania had moved on from the June 1990 *Mineriadă* and the dominance of the former communist elite in power. Moreover, the square affirmed that those who had died in the *Mineriadă* had not done so in vain. Several months before accession an 'EU Clock' (recalling the original 'university clock') was placed in the middle of the intersection with a digital display which counted down the days and hours to accession. On the night of 31 December 2006, *Piaţa Universităţii* was the location for the official celebrations of Romania's accession (led by the president). This cramped and irregular space was entirely unsuited to a mass public gathering so that many people (including two of the authors) were unable to get close enough to see anything. A more suitable location would have been *Piaţa Constituţiei* about a kilometre away which reportedly has room for half a million people. But this space, immediately in front of Nicolae Ceauşescu's monumental 'House of the People', has entirely the wrong meanings attached to it.

As a place initially associated with opposition to the presence of a government dominated by former communists, *Piaţa Universităţii* has also become a broader space of protest addressed to governments of all political colours. For example, in January 2012 the square became the site of public protests against the centre-right government and president. They were triggered

by the resignation of the popular deputy Health Minister in protest at government's attempt to push through partial privatisation of health services. Crowds protested throughout Romania and in Bucharest several hundred people did the same in *Piaţa Universităţii*. The following day their numbers had increased significantly and violent clashes between police and protesters followed (resulting in many injuries on both sides). The Romanian press quickly drew comparisons with June 1990, leading to the proposed health reforms being quickly withdrawn, thus demonstrating the symbolic power of this space drawing on its history of association with opposition during the revolution and *Mineriadă*. Moreover, the protests continued, but were now directed against austerity, corruption and an unpopular government and President (Ionita 2012). They continued for several weeks (despite freezing temperatures) but, as one commentator noted, failed to attract widespread public support (despite the general unpopularity of the government) so that they did not achieve the scale of 'Occupy' movements in other cities (Ionita 2012).

The following year *Piaţa Universităţii* was the centre in Bucharest of further nationwide protests. A Canadian company proposed developing an opencast gold mine in the small Transylvanian village of *Roşia Montana* and the enabling legislation was due to go through parliament in August 2013. However, protesters sought to highlight the environmental damage which they claimed the project would cause (Mercea 2014). The result was nationwide protests throughout Romania which, according to some commentators, were the largest mass protests since the 1989 revolution (Romocea 2013). In Bucharest, crowds of up to 15,000 (mostly young) people gathered in *Piaţa Universităţii*. Since their protests were initially ignored by the media the protesters proved highly effective in using social media to promote their cause which was a notable feature of protests associated with the international 'Occupy' movement (Kilibarda 2012; Lubin 2012). These demonstrations differed from those

of 2012 in their exuberant, joyful and non-violent character which included performances by actors and classical musicians. Nevertheless, there was a strong anti-establishment current underpinning the protest (Tismaneanu 2013a) again linking to the values and meanings now associated with *University Square*. The nationwide protests were successful. In December 2013 both houses of the Romanian parliament rejected the opencast mine proposal in what was hailed as a victory for civil society in Romania. One political scientist observed that the protests in *Piaţa Universităţii* had represented a return of the spirit of protest of June 1990 (Tismaneanu 2013b).

Today the geography of the square is still evolving and this shapes how the space is used for critical reasoning. The area to the south around the statues on *Bulevardul Regina Elisabeta* (see Figure 1) has once again developed as an area for cultural performances, cafes and socialising, rather like it was in pre-Communist Bucharest. In part this reflects a form of nostalgia for the era of Bucharest as 'Little Paris', which in turn is bound into re-imaginations of Romania's post-1989 'return to Europe' and more recently plans to celebrate *Bucuresti 555*, a series of events to mark 555th year of the city, itself a means of promoting a new image for the capital internationally. However, the part of the square formed by *Piaţa 21 Decembrie 1989* and in front of the national theatre is still firmly associated with remembrance and protest, both in people's minds and various performances. Any organisation seeking to protest does so in this part of the square, and when the media covers protest it always uses this space as a backdrop.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the historical development of the characteristics of a notable space for protest in the Romanian capital, Bucharest - *Piaţa Universităţii* or *University Square*. This public space exhibits complex dynamic links between the physical development of the square, the events which took place there and how it functions as a space of representation in which politics, identity, civil society, memory and the notion of 'the public' in a Romanian context have been shaped over time. The analysis has shown how the association of the square with protest is a process of long-term historical development. Originally conceived as a space which symbolised the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century re-invention of Romania as a Western, capitalist, modern nation, it was physically remodelled and associated with a very different vision of the nation under Communism. Some early associations with protest and dissent during these periods developed into the square being associated with resistance to both Communist and post-socialist regimes though the violent events of the 1989 revolution and 1990 *Mineriadă*.

This link was strengthened by the ways in which those events were commemorated and remembered in that space, leaving a legacy linking the square to notions of personal sacrifice in the struggle against powerful regimes which informs how the square is used for protests against the state today. Locally specific factors played a key role in the development of this public space as a space of protest and the way that those factors were represented and remembered is important for sustaining it as a place of protest. Thus understanding the 'work' of maintaining public space as a space of protest over time is an important part of any analysis of why certain spaces become produced and reproduced through 'place-specific discursive practice of protest' (Jansen 2001, 38). One key factor that emerges here is the importance of how people perform and sustain the memory of protest and sacrifice that gives this public space almost sacred status.

Analysing *Piata Universităţii* has also allowed us to unravel the inter-connections between public space, the state, civil society and democracy in Romania. This public space represents the division in post-Communist Romania between state and civil society in which the majority of the population do not see the 1989 revolution as forming a distinct break from the Communist past – as the state wishes to portray it - but instead regard the revolution, the *Mineriadă* and other subsequent events as demonstrating the continuity in power of former Communists and a continued divide between the state and civil society. The lack of convergence between civil society and the state is clearly reflected in this geography of representational public space, in which forms of state-led remembrance and memory differ markedly in form and location from those led by individuals and non-state organisations making up civil society. In terms of the issue of control of public space by powerful elites it demonstrates civil society exerting a 'right to the city' through developing and sustaining a 'countermemory' in and through public space in the face of a powerful elite anxious to promote other, state-led discourses and practices of remembrance. That *University Square* continues to be a site of protest against a range of issues in post-Communist Romania demonstrates the power of these associations and suggests that *Piaţa Universităţii* will be a key public space in which the development of the Romanian state, civil society and democracy can be traced for some generations to come.

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