The City Belongs to Everybody: Claiming Public Spaces in Chisinau

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At the Chisinau City Council meeting on September 5, 2013, a scandalous, unusual, informal alliance sprang up between representatives of the Liberal Party (PL, the party of the present mayor Dorin Chirtoaca) and those of the Communist Party (PCRM). Together they decided to allow allotments, green areas, and other city property to the representatives of these parties and certain affiliated groups.[1] The Liberal Democratic Party (PLDM) boycotted the meeting, accusing the PL and the PCRM of making dubious deals under the table to divide city grounds and spaces between themselves.[2] The mayor of Chisinau, in turn, accused the PLDM party of theft of public property, ineffective management, and dubious administration of the Chisinau Airport and the Economy Bank.[3] These accusations aroused suspicion from a small group of civil society members, but their misgivings came too late and had no bearing on the decisions already adopted by the local administration.

This anecdote illustrates an all-too-familiar scene in current post-Soviet Moldovan politics, including the arbitrariness of ideological platforms; the importance of economic interest over slogans and party rhetoric; and the weakness of civil society and activist groups. Such groups are constantly unable to voice criticisms, and are thereby excluded from the decision-making process, and condemned for their supposedly reactive attitudes.

In short, the political landscape of Chisinau comprises three groups: an administration that acts mostly on behalf of business interests, scattered groups of activists, and the mostly passive citizens.

The paradigm has remained mostly unchanged during the last 20 years. Chisinau, along with other parts of the country, did not previously witness massive urban protests that targeted the city and its problems. The tensest moments of recent Moldavian history were related to more general themes of national identity (1989), social policies (2000), and elections and democracy on a national level (April 2009).

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1   http://unimedia.info/stiri/doc-edina-CMC-loc-pentru-tranzaii-frauduloase-65204.html
2   http://www.inprofunzime.md/stiri/politic/pldm-a-boicotat-sedinta-consiliului-municipal-pl-si-pcrm-au-facut.html
3   https://www.adevarul.ro/moldova/politica/haos-sedinta-cmc-nu-vorba-despre-alianta-pldm-trebui-vina-munca-nu-arunce-acuzatii-1_52286987c7b855ff564b98ab/index.html

Major problems of the city – the urban public space, the policies of discrimination and exclusion within the urban space, urban citizenship, the right to the city, decision-making transparency in local public administration – have been ignored, either pushed to the edge of the public discourse or, in the best case, merely assimilated into larger political debates such as that of Communism versus democracy (in the 2003 election campaign for local administration). The result of this continued disregard can be attributed to the deplorable state of public space in Chisinau. Within the last 20 years, the city has suffered a series of transformations that have had detrimental consequences:

- Existing public spaces (parks, sport and cultural infrastructures, recreational areas, courtyards near blocks and playgrounds, etc.) degraded due to lax administration of the spaces by local authorities.
- The privatization/fencing of public property resulted in the transformation of public spaces (parks, green areas, etc.) into private spaces where hotels, restaurants, and other commercial buildings were erected.
- A rise in the number of cars led to a daily overload of traffic in the city center (the amount of daily traffic in Chisinau has increased several times within the past 20 years). The absence of available parking spaces has also turned most of the sidewalks and the areas between blocks and roads into parking areas, thereby limiting space for pedestrians and cyclists.
- Intense migration from rural to urban areas and subsequent need for residential buildings has resulted in the explosion of the construction industry. Between 2005 and 2010 over 10,000 new apartments were built in Chisinau,[4] resulting in the deforestation of green areas, reduction of spaces between blocks, and destruction of playgrounds and recreational areas.
- The commercialization of public spaces resulted in an explosion of street advertising and vendors (of newspapers, baked goods, cigarettes, alcohol, clothing, fast food, kvas and other refreshments, etc.).
- The public/social activities (recreation, socialization, rest, artistic activity) of public spaces have been replaced with profit-making entities (parks, public toilets, water sources, etc.). The city has thus not only lost public spaces for social activities, but also become devoid of free public toilets and sources of drinking water.
- Citizens have been continuously excluded from decision-making processes concerning urban policies, city development, local project financing, and more.
- The city center has been taken over by large commercial projects such as those of Sun City (a mall), Skytower (an office building), the Nobil Hotel, and Grand Plaza (a residential complex).
- The historic city center and its existing social structure have been destroyed. Within the past 17 years, of 977 architectural sites that formed the center, 78 (nearly 10%) have been completely demolished, and another 155 have

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4   Construction in the Republic of Moldova. National Statistics Bureau, Chisinau, 2011, p. 58
     (http://www.statistica.md/public/files/publicatii_electronice/Costructii/2011/Constructii_2011.pdf).

undergone reconstructions that significantly altered their uniqueness and authenticity.[5]

- Certain political and religious groups took over public spaces in a way that excluded others (religious minorities, economically disadvantaged groups, etc.) from use of those spaces. Police-enforced political control of the spaces contributed to the marginalization and exclusion of groups that do not fit into the image of a "decent" city, such as homeless people, beggars, prostitutes, people with alcohol or drug addictions, etc.

Such transformations are not unique to Chisinau. Most post-Socialist cities have undergone similar processes related to the political-economic context.[6] They have encountered accelerated reforms for the introduction of the market economy, the de-industrialisation of urban economies and the growth of the services sector, the rise of consumption, the gradual dismantlement of the social state, the rise of social inequality, political and religious populism, and the consolidation of some political-economic oligarchies on local and national levels.

Claiming Public Spaces in Chisinau: Methodological Introduction

This article intends to describe several urban activism movements from Chisinau that have differed in vision, strategies, ethnic and political compositions, messages, and symbols. These movements are rather recent, having taken place in the last two to three years, although some of the organizations became active much earlier. The Oberliht Association, for example, a participant in the protest at Europe Square, has been active in the public space of Chisinau since early 2000.

My perspective is two-fold, as both an activist and a sociologist. Therefore this text will speak in two voices that may sometimes overlap but in other cases will speak distinctly. As a sociologist I will attempt to anchor my observations, facts, and activities in the context of contemporary social theory. My activist perspective will be influenced more personally, as I participated directly in various ways (in the organization of the activities, dissemination of materials, etc.). I fit this methodology within the tradition of public sociology, inaugurated by Michael Burawoy:[7] I understand my approach not only as one of theoretical reflection upon social processes, but also as a presentation of one type of local activism that might be connected to other types of activism, and as a development of some recommendations which might facilitate other urban movements.

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5 The Black Book of the Cultural Patrimony of Chisinau, 2010.

6 For a larger discussion see Hirt, Sonia, Iron Curtains Gates, *Suburbs and Privatization of space in the Post-socialist City,* Hoboken, N.J.; Wiley & Sons, 2012 and Stanilov, Kiril, The Post-Socialist City: Urban Form an Space Transformations in Ceantral and Eastern Europe After Socialism, Springer, 2010.

7 Burawoy, Michael, 2007, "For Public Sociology" Pp. 23-64 in Public Sociology: *Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate Policies and the Profession the Twenty-First Century,* edited by Dan Clawson et al., Berkeley, University of California Press.

I will present three cases of activism toward claiming public space: the anti-Sbarro protest on Europe Square, the movement for the revitalization of the Cantemir Boulevard axis, and the reconstruction of the Rotonda in Valea Morilor Park.

I examine these three cases within the theoretical framework of "reactive protests versus proactive protests" or "from opposition to proposition."[8] This conceptual model developed following a reflection upon anti/alter-globalization movements such as the World Social Forum (WSF) and the 1999 Seattle protests.

The category of reactive protests, as defined generally, includes protests that are "anti" actions, through which the social movement, group of activists, or civil society opposes an action of the state or local authority, of the economic agent, or of other groups of citizens. Protests against demolition of historic monuments and illegal constructions can be included in this type of protest.

The category of proactive protests, on the other hand, refers to protest actions by which the social movement, group of activists, or civil society not only opposes a certain type of action but also implements reform projects or offers suggestions for alternative practices.

The distinction between these categories – which appeared from contemporary Gramscian reflections on discursive dominations and the possibilities of combat against neoliberal hegemony through "alter-hegemonies" – is obviously not absolute. It should be perceived as a flexible continuum rather than a dichotomy. Such flexible approaches (see especially Pinsky)[9] are aware that the protest isn't fixed in a linear scheme, but rather under a dynamic logic, in which the reactive and proactive aspects coexist. As arbitrary as it is, the distinction is still necessary because it guides the protest movements, allowing them to not only identify the fact that they oppose a certain cause (via the reactive phase), but also to recognize and contest what the dominating discourse may present as "natural" or "the only possible solution" (in the proactive phase).

Case 1. The Anti-Sbarro Protest in Europe Square

a) Chronology
The Europe Square, situated at the entrance in the Stefan cel Mare si Sfant Public Garden, was inaugurated by a delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova and the city council of Chisinau in 2008. A presentation of the EU logo redesigned with flowers and a newly installed flag marked the occasion.

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8   Marian Pinsky, *From Reactive to Proactive: The World Social Forum and the Anti/Alter-Globalization Movement*, Mc-Gill Sociological Review, Volume I, January 2010, pp.3-28; Marks, Gary, and Doug McAdam, *"Social Movements and the Changing Structure of Political Opportunity in the European Union 1."* West European Politics 19, no. 2 (1996), 249-278; Buechler, Steven M., *"New Social Movement Theories",* Sociological Quarterly 36, no. 3 (1995); 441-464.
9   Ibid.

The political significance was obvious – the newly elected mayor Dorin Chirtoaca represented the Liberal Party, a political formation whose platform placed great emphasis on accelerating the country's European integration. This directly opposed the governing party of the time, which had a pro-Eastern, Communist orientation.

The new leadership of the city invested enormously in the symbolic aspect of this location; it is where the mayor annually presents to the citizens his report of the year's activity. Indeed, Europe Square was built deliberately as a monument-space that symbolizes the European aspirations of Moldova.[10]

In the beginning of December 2012, a fence went up around the square, indicating new forthcoming construction. The first person to signal this new construction site was the activist Oleg Brega, on the web television platform Curaj TV.[11] Later there appeared some texts about this construction site on personal blogs, on some public platforms,[12] and on social networks. There was much controversy about the lack of information on a supposedly public entity.

Finally on December 17, the mayor commanded the city hall's architecture and public relations directors to provide the public with more information on the construction on the square.[13] These authorities merely asserted that the construction was "perfectly legal," which did not satisfy the activist communities, including NGO *My Dear City* and other organizations such as Save the Green Chisinau Association, Salvgardare Association, Oberliht Association, the Agency for Inspection and Restoration of Monuments, as well as informal groups of other active citizens and bloggers. They agreed to organize a public protest for Wednesday 26, at 11:00 A.M. In the meantime, they created a Facebook page and a blog dedicated to the protest.[14]

The online social networks not only brought people together who did not know each other, but also facilitated the organization of the protest. The activists were able to efficiently share the tasks: soliciting the official documents from the city hall, researching the legal aspects to prepare juridical criticisms, printing the banners and slogans for the protest, etc.

Several days before the protest, the Europe Square construction site also caught the attention of the mainstream media.[15] The public debate was therefore widened.

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10 In the Republic of Moldova, the process of joining to the European Union represents more than a technical process, of negotiation of policies: it was conceived as a national project of modernization and as civilizing choice.

11 http://curaj.tv/local/chisinau/constructie-noua-la-intrarea-in-parcul-central/

12 Vitalie Spranceana, National culture as a drinking house. About the Stefan cel Mare si Sfant Public Garden. http://voxreport.unimedia.info/2012/12/15/cultura-nationala-ca-o-carciuma-despre-gradina-publica-stefan-cel-mare-si-sfant/

13 http://www.privesc.eu/Arhiva/14079/Sedinta-saptamanala-a-serviciilor-primariei-Chisinau-din-17-decembrie-2012

14 http://gradina-publica.blogspot.com/

15 See: A new cafeteria with terrace in the centre of the capital. The building will be placed near Europe Square, http://unimedia.info/stiri/foto-o-noua-cafenea-cu-terasa-in-centrul-capitalei--localul-va-fi-amplasat-in-preajma-scuarului-europei-55580.html#!prettyPhoto; Natalia Hadarca, *A new "pighouse" in the centre of Chisinau?*

On December 25, the day before the protest, the entrepreneurs made a public statement that they intended to build a pizzeria that is part of the American chain Sbarro.[16] Later that day, the activists participated in a workshop organized by the Oberliht Association to write protest slogans.

The protest was held, as planned, on December 26, and without any major setbacks. The press, widely present, reported on the event in positive terms and gave voice to the protestors' statements. Because the construction didn't comply with all legal requirements, lacking the approval of the Ministry of Culture and the National Monuments Council, the protesters demanded the suspension of the construction, the initiation of some public consultations, and as a measure that would prevent similar situations in the future, increased transparency and citizens' participation in decision-making processes.

At this moment, Mayor Dorin Chirtoaca ordered construction on this site to stop until the circumstances could be clarified. Thus the first objective of the protest to stop the construction was successfully accomplished. However, the same evening, under the pretext that the mayor's order had not yet been presented to them, the entrepreneurs continued construction, pouring the concrete foundation of the future pizzeria.

An activist who witnessed this by chance immediately passed the news on in the social networks. Several activists, accompanied by television reporters, went to the site and filmed the process. Mayor Chirtoaca also appeared, promising to punish the entrepreneurs for wilfully disobeying city hall orders. The next day, the secret construction was broadcasted on television and drew much commentary.

At the weekly city hall meeting on December 28, the authorities reconfirmed their intention to cancel the construction authorization and to restore the historic ground to the public garden space. The fence was removed the same day and the pizzeria foundation demolished in the beginning of March 2013.

b) Reflections and Practices
In a way, the protest against the construction in Europe Square, with its effective social mobilization, media presence, pressure on the authorities, and eventual dismantling of the illegal construction, is an exemplary story of success. Furthermore, in order to avoid future scandals, city hall began to publish on its official website all construction authorizations granted and applied for. More broadly speaking, the protest also initiated the practice of opening sensitive subject matter regarding the historical site to public debate.

Still, from a different point of view, the protest failed in several respects. First, as one of the protest participants pointed out, "although the construction itself was

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16 http://adevarul.ro/moldova/social/o-nouacostereata-centrul-chisinaului-1_50d82da5596d720091300cd5/index.html

stopped, the bureaucratic machinery of the directions that give illegal authorization still remained functional and untouched."[17] No official in the long bureaucratic chain that initially authorized the construction has been prosecuted; Mayor Chirtoaca only promised that he would withdraw his personal trust in the guilty individuals. The effort also failed to generate a debate large enough (i.e. involving at least a majority of the city) about urban citizenship, participative democracy, exclusion, and the right to have a voice.

But if we bear in mind that the activist scene is presently ethnically and linguistically disjointed, the protest had a generally favourable result.

What lessons can we learn from this protest?

I will not elaborate on all the circumstances and factors that influenced the events that transpired (anyway we do not know much about what took place beyond bureaucratic curtains), but only on some I consider noteworthy.

- **The legalistic moment.** The entrepreneurs did not have all documents in order. A decisive factor in making the legal aspects clear was the presence and active participation of Mr. Ion Stefanita, the Director of the Agency for Inspection and Restoration of Monuments (AIRM), an institution affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and responsible for protecting the heritage of the Republic of Moldova. As a member of the National Monuments Council, the institution that would have granted the entrepreneurs authorization should they have warranted it, Mr. Stefanita knew that they had not properly received approval from the Council. This permitted the activists to position themselves clearly within the legal context, with all its practical and moral advantages. The entrepreneurs had no choice but to inhabit the legal realm and to suffer the negative moral and symbolic consequences of this positioning.
- **The symbolic moment.** As studies of social movements demonstrate, a vital tool in such movements is the ability to build and manipulate symbolic interpretations,[18] which can catalyse the growth of activist networks or generate additional pressure upon political actors. In the case of the Europe Square protest, the symbolic strategies were moulded on an abundance of pre-existing symbolic formulations: the Classics Alley, the Stefan cel Mare si Sfant Public Garden, the most important monument to Chisinau which has existed in the centre of the city for 200 years, the monument of the national poet Mihai Eminescu, Europe Square and the current Mayor's declared commitment to the project of European integration, his own image of a young reformist insistently promoted by the Mayor, etc. The activists subverted the rhetoric of the

17 Vitalie Sprinceana – How we protest (about Europe Square, Sbarro and Mayor Chirtoaca). http://www.spranceana. com/2012/12/27/cum-protestam-despre-scuarul-europei-sbarro-si-primarul-chirtoaca
18 Keck, Margaret E. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Cornell University Press, 1998. pp.22-23.

authorities to use it against them. Thus the slogan "The Public Garden resisted for 200 years under authoritarian regimes but now is on the edge of vanishing in 20 years of democracy" combined references to the democratic rhetoric of the mayor and the authoritarian rhetoric from which he claimed separation. Another message, presented as a collage, showed Mihai Eminescu, the national poet and guardian figure of the democratic right, with a Sbarro pizza beside him. The poet was depicted as saying he would like a pizza for his birthday (coincidentally, his birthday is celebrated on January 15). This strategic juxtaposition aimed to reveal an inconsistency – on one hand, the authorities self-importantly celebrated Eminescu every year, and on the other hand they intended to build a commercial pizzeria right by his monument!

- **The technological moment.** Much has been written about the role of information technology in protest movements, both positive and negative.[19] The "Twitter revolution from Moldova" on 7 April 2009 put the country on the map, making it a prominent focus in studying the impact of technology on the political process.[20] The Europe Square protest certainly benefited from effective use of the Internet – one might even say that the protest would have been less successful if the participants had not used it. They created several discussions groups on Facebook, as well as a blog on which to post daily updates, explanations, scanned copies of official documents, protest resolutions, etc. The blog was also a useful place to compile feedback from the press: links to news sites, television channels, and other media presentations. The use of Facebook also led to connection via mobile phones, which has continued past the end of the protest. Other blogs and discussion forums, among them voxreport. unimedia.md, also helped generate visibility for the protest.

- Unfortunately, the protest also suffered from certain negative aspects of technology. Several activists received anonymous phone calls trying to intimidate them.[21] Even though these calls failed to achieve their goal of causing rifts among the activists, they still showed the potential vulnerabilities of online communication during protest actions – ill-intended anonymity can erode the fragile trust of an eclectic community that only knows each other online!

- **The communicative moment.** Throughout the duration of the protest, the participants maintained a distinct voice and tried to make it heard despite the media turmoil. Especially important was to answer, at each step, three fundamental questions: Who are we? Why are we protesting? What are the demands of the protest? Sometimes local media misinterpreted certain aspects. For example, the fact that the City Hall was guilty of bad management of public

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19 For enthusiastic opinions see especially Howard Rheingold. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution.* Basic Books. 2007. For a critical view over the liberating potential of Internet see Evgeny Morozov. *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom.* PublicAffairs, 2012.
20 "Twitter Revolution. Episode 1: Republic of Moldova", ARC, Știința Publishing Houses, Chisinau, 2010"
21 The conflict related to the construction from Europe Square is growing: a protester claims to be intimidated by phone." http://www.noi.md/md/news_id/18156

property resulted in identifying the mayor as responsible for creating the conflict. This, in turn, allowed certain members of the press to infer an anti-mayor logic, against the party that he represents. Another logic attempted to find violence within the protest actions. Due to such misinterpretations, keeping a voice of our own, where we could, was a crucial to the success of the protest.

- **The political moment.** In many regards, the protest actions of Europe Square represented political innovations within the Moldovan political context. First, the activists managed to build a new field of action and discourse outside the traditional political space. This new political field has centred on the issue of public space and served as a platform for the discussion of some broader political themes – urban citizenship, symbolic policies, the right to claim the city – that often escape narrower partisan discourses, as well as of social movements in Moldova. Second, the theme of political space turned out to be one that could transcend the ideological, ethnic, and linguistic barriers that fissure the activist medium in Moldova: The protest brought together organizations of artists, Russian-speaking activists, Romanian-speaking activists, left-wing activists, and right-wing activists.

Case 2. Cantemir Boulevard

The project of Cantemir Boulevard, led by architect Alexei Shchiusev, emerged immediately after the Second World War in a development plan for the city of Chisinau. According to the plan, the lower part of the city was to be demolished in order to give way to a spacious boulevard that would allow for the synchronization of the upper part of the city with the lower. The mass destruction of the Second World War, which partially or totally destroyed approximately seventy percent of the city's buildings,[22] and the immense respect that Shchiusev commanded allowed the authorities to carve the city as they pleased.

The first plan intended for Cantemir Boulevard to end at Cosmonauts Street, but in 1972 the boulevard was extended to reach Calea Iesilor Street. Only several parts of the projected boulevard have actually been built, however: the Cosmonauts Street, the part between Negruzzi and Ismail Streets, and the part extending from Calea Iesilor.

Surprisingly, the idea of building Cantemir Boulevard survived the dissolution of the Soviet Union and has continued under the democratic leadership and its General Urbanistic Plan (GUP) adopted in 2007.[23] The leadership argued the boulevard could make road traffic through the central sector more fluid, and connect the Chisinau Airport with the Buiucani district. A large community of architects criticized this

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22 Virgil Paslariuc. "Who devastated the historic Chisinau?" http://www.historia.ro/exclusiv_web/general/articol/cine-devastat-chisinaul-iulie-1941
23 General Urbanistic Plan. http://www.chisinau.md/category.php?l=ro&idc=500

initiative on the grounds that it would violate national laws and international conventions signed by the Republic of Moldova protecting historically significant parts of the city, which includes the city centre.[24] The architects accused the City Hall of adopting decisions without consulting specialists in the field. Afterwards, the GUP was rejected by both the Moldova Academy of Science and the Ministry of Culture.

Presently, Cantemir Boulevard remains in limbo. The discussions surrounding the GUP have shifted to the Zonal Urbanistic Project (ZUP), which likewise hopes to improve the city centre and to build the boulevard.

In response, a group of artists and architects launched a project to prevent the building of the boulevard, the mass destruction of historically significant architecture, and the subsequent negative impact on societal life. They aimed to engage locals – temporary and permanent residents, service workers, passers-by— in various activities that would strengthen local identity, revitalize some abandoned public spaces, and attract and inspire other parts of the city.

The first stage of this project of revitalization, which took place from July 2-6, 2012 and was organized by the Oberliht Young Artists Association (Chisinau, Moldova) and Planwerk (Cluj, Romania), was a workshop entitled Mapping the Public Spaces of Chisinau.[25] The programme included an exploration of new criteria and ways of cataloguing the city's public spaces, conception of a new grid for evaluating selected public spaces, and tours of the mapped zones. It also identified ten locations of the would-be Cantemir Boulevard with potential for revitalization.

The second stage was the creation of a reading group called Public Space in Post-Socialism led by the author, which was held in the summer and autumn of 2012 and gathered students, artists, and activists. This reading group, also present on social networks, aimed to familiarize its members with fundamental theoretical concepts necessary to understand urban policies, urban democracy, the right to the city, and the regional and local transformations that had occurred in post-Socialist areas over the last twenty years. A direct result of the group was the organization of a regularly previous updated online library containing relevant texts, both classic and contemporary, in Romanian, Russian, English, and French.[26]

The third stage was to conduct a survey of users of the public space from the chosen ten locations along Cantemir Boulevard. The author developed the questionnaire in collaboration with several students from the Faculty of History

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24 A group of architects claims that the decision to build Cantemir Boulevard has been taken by interested persons without consulting the specialists. http://unimedia.info/stiri/-1212.html.
25 Mapping of Public Space in Chișinău workshop (2012-13). http://chisineu.wordpress.com/proiecte/atelier-cartogra-fiere/.
26 http://chisineu.wordpress.com/biblioteca.

and Philosophy, and the Department of Philosophy and Anthropology of the State University of Moldova and conducted the survey in March-April 2013. The survey included questions about the activities of the places, civic involvement, wishes and visions for changes in the locals' use of public space, mechanisms of social inclusion or exclusion, and emotional attachment to the place. The results were publicly presented in May 2013.

The most interesting – and perhaps most useful – feedback was the prevailing skepticism among users of the public spaces regarding the possibility of their being involved in decision-making processes. A large majority of those surveyed expressed that they would gladly participate in those processes, and have many ideas for the renovation of these spaces, but are doubtful whether the authorities would pay any attention to them.

As such, this community of artist-activists decided that the project they launched must not only be done for the citizens, but also by them. They organized, through international participation as a part of the project *The Civic Center of Chisinau*, a series of artistic events on Cantemir Boulevard concerning the revitalization of the ten identified locations. Architects Alex Axinte and Cristi Borcan from *studioBASAR* in Romania organized a public workshop of urban interventions during September 7-13, 2013.[27] This workshop was followed by a hands-on rehabilitation project by residents at the intersection of Ivan Zaikin and Sf. Andrei Streets, as well as a picnic and film screening. As part of the same project, Slovak artists Jana Kapelova and Michal Moravčik conducted an intervention in a different location, on Balanescu Street, reusing old furniture gathered from local residents.[28] Swedish artist Karl Hallberg contributed an intervention of his own, in "Triangle 2", the intersection of Pruncul, Sf. Andrei, and I. Doncev Streets.[29]

One of the great difficulties in evaluating the success of these movements is in the fact that they are almost always works-in-progress. Such is the case with Cantemir Boulevard. It is still too soon to evaluate its chances of long-term success. Fortunately, the boulevard plan is still in discussion and there is strong opposition from the artistic community against its construction. On the other hand, entrepreneurs and commercial agents have taken advantage of the chaos of GUP and ZUP to demolish and rebuild large parts of the area without approval from the authorities. As indicated by one of the activists, there is a risk that the Cantemir Boulevard zone could be completely demolished even before any decision is made on its plans. In these circumstances, two communities gain particular significance.

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27 T*he Civic Center of Chisinau: Recovered Spaces*. Urban Interventions Workshop with *studioBASAR* (Cristi BORCAN) and Tudor ELIAN [RO], September 7-11, 2013 http://chisineu.wordpress.com/2013/08/23/spatii-recuperate/.
28 SPACES: Projection by Jana KAPELOVA and Michal MORAVĆIK (Public Pedestal) [SK"If we don't need it?" 21.09.2013, 20:00 http://chisineu.wordpress.com/2013/09/21/daca-nu-va-trebuie-film/.
29 SPACES: Intersectionsan installation by Karl HALLBERG, 20.09.2013, 17:00 http://chisineu.wordpress.com/2013/09/20/intersectii/.

The first is artist communities, specifically those within urban activism. They decidedly enrich the symbolic repertoire, make activist movements more attractive, and bring about new reflections and arts practices in public space. Urban activist-artists are as opportune as "regular" local artists are obsessively separate from politics – this is a consequence of the excessive politicization of art in the Soviet period and tendency to keep any political art to "quiet" themes such as anti-Communism, national identity, or orthodoxy. The possibilities of art interventions are truly limitless, both in real space and in virtual space.

The second community is that consisting of foreign artists. Their significance lies in the possibility of establishing transnational connections. However, this community is not without its complications. Although its efforts could improve the visibility of local actions outside of the country, it could also take away opportunities from local Moldovan artists; art interventions in public spaces could become a privilege of foreign artists, leaving Moldovan artists to search for other niches. There is a difficult balance to strike between their respective involvements.

Case 3. The Rotonda of Valea Morilor Park

a) Chronology

Valea Morilor Park (known during the Soviet era as the Central Culture and Recreation Park of the Leninist Komsomol of Moldova, Leonid Brezhnev) was developed by the architect Robert Kurtz. Its construction began in 1950 under then-first secretary of the Moldovan Communist party, Leonid Brejnev.[30] The eponymous youth division of the Communist party, the Komsomol, and other youth throughout the city executed the actual construction of the park, the lake, and cultural objects. In the seventies, the main entrance at Serghei Lazo Street, where the Rotonda and the Cascade Ladder are situated, became an important centre of cultural life and recreation for the city residents.

After the fallout of the Soviet Union, the lake became filled with mud and the surrounding park significantly degraded. Although from 2006 to 2011 the authorities organized a thorough cleaning and reconstruction of the lake and it is now open again to the public, other parts, including the Cascade Ladder, the street lights, and nearby roads remain in a state of decay and disuse. The Rotonda also became covered in inscriptions and its base a site of public garbage disposal.

The park's condition moved Moldovan immigrant Antonina Svalbonene, originally from Greece, to put out a discreet call on Facebook for the revitalization of the Rotonda. In January 2013, she urged city residents to organize a collective clean-up of the area surrounding the Rotonda, especially the steps and pavilion. The

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30 *Chisinau: the Encyclopedia. A – Z* / A. N. Timush. Main edition of the Moldovan Soviet Encyclopedia, 1984.

response was positive: a small but slowly building community consolidated on the Facebook group "Vosstanovim Kishinev"[31] (Russian) or "Sa restabilim orasul Chisinau" (Romanian), which translates to "Let's recover Chisinau" in English. After further deliberations, the group decided to organize a clean-up for Sunday, February 3, 2013.

Despite the cold weather and the snow, several dozens people went to the park, where they set to work cleaning the area. They gathered the withered leaves and branches, the plastic and metal trash, and other garbage. The clean-up attracted the attention of several politicians, including a former mayoral candidate, as well as several television stars, journalists, bloggers, and activists. This civic action, all the more admirable considering the weather conditions, was widely presented in the media later, both through traditional media (some of which were present at the clean-up) as well as social media and blogs. Together they sparked further interest in the area.

City leadership also reacted to this initiative, with Mayor Dorin Chirtoaca promising at a city council meeting that he would grant the necessary support to recover the Rotonda. He ordered calculations of the finances required, but the sum presented turned out to be extremely high: 600 million Lei (50 million USD). Some activists suspect that city hall justifies its lack of action and withdrawal from the rehabilitation effort due to this potential financial burden.

Meanwhile, for several months, the Rotonda initiative continued within the online social networks; locals decided that they had to take the effort into their own hands rather than count on the support of the authorities. They decided that the recovery of the Rotonda meant not only restoring its physical condition, but also restoring the cultural life it once had. This would sustain their motivation and efforts, and make them meaningful in the long term.

A second collective clean-up took place on August 10. This time the activists not only cleaned the area but also painted the Rotonda itself, as well as the fence in the back. The clean-up was followed by a master class of Argentine dance organized by the School of Dance Tango Argentino Chisinau, led by Tatiana Grodinskaia.[32]
On August 22, the Rotonda hosted its first live concert with the support of the Presidential Orchestra of the Republic of Moldova, drawing 2000 people to the event. In September several benches and trash cans were installed.

b) Reflections and practices
The revitalization of the Rotonda in Valea Morilor Park is an interesting case of activist effort with important transnational and multi-ethnic participation. Like the

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31 https://www.facebook.com/groups/vosstanovim.kishinev/

32 Residents of Chisinau are called to clean the Valea Morilor park. http://www.pan.md/blog/Kishinevtsev-zovut-pribratisya-v-parke-Valea-morilor/41125

aforementioned rehabilitation of the Cantemir Boulevard area, however, this is a movement still in development and its potential outcomes are numerous.

The movement still has to face several challenges in the near future, including the following: building bridges with Romanian-speaking communities, accepting alternative cultural groups, traps of political affiliations and maintaining its civic dimension.

Below I will reflect and elaborate further on significant aspects of the movement:

- The proactive moment. This is perhaps the most significant contribution of the movement: The actions not only helped to restore a space that was abandoned for many years, but also reintegrated it into the city's cultural life. Furthermore, through this movement, the activist community shifted decidedly from the reaction phase to one of social and political creativity. The Rotonda recovery initiative undoubtedly enlarged the protest and activist repertoire of the city.
- The political moment. Even though the organizers and activists took care to avoid affiliation of the cause with any political parties, political influence has been palpable at each step. Initially, Igor Dodon, a former mayoral candidate and president of the Socialist party – and therefore a political rival of the present mayor – participated actively at the general cleaning from February 3, both personally and through a youth organization he leads. His presence as well as his declarations significantly impacted the mayor's quick reaction, who dubbed the recovery of the Rotonda populist. After this, political interest in the Rotonda diminished for a while, allowing the movement to develop upon a logic of its own and to plan, far from the eyes of the press, its further actions. Eventually, however, some journalists, political activists from another opposing party – the Communist Party (PCRM) – became involved. These included Dimitrii Kavruk, the editor-in-chief of the communist publication PULS, and Constantin Starish, deputy in the parliament of the Republic of Moldova from PCRM. Even though they claimed exclusively civic, non-party-affiliated participation, their known affiliation represented a challenge for the movement to constantly prove that it positions itself outside party sympathies.

The challenge of political affiliations will likely be more acute than before in 2014, which is an election year for the Parliament. In the present political context, Mayor Chirtoaca represents a national political party that is in strong opposition to and competition with the other parties, especially the Communist party. The success and failures in Chisinau will count immensely on Chirtoaca's election agenda; this is why a successful initiative such as the Rotonda, conducted without support from the local authorities, will be rather uncomfortable for the city administration, which may decide to get involved in order to co-opt the movement and claim its success for the administration. On the other hand, some other political forces such as the Socialist Party, which has the most consistently anti-Chirtoaca platform, may decide

to claim to be part of the success of this movement and to become involved at a later stage of the project. If that happens, we shall see.

- The ethnic-cultural moment. The initiative for revitalization of the Rotonda is certainly anchored in the personal and collective nostalgia of a particular social group – a large part of the Chisinau's Russian-speaking population (which includes Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews). This is one of the project's strengths, but simultaneously also one of its greatest vulnerabilities. The explicit aim of the community, declared countless times, is to restore the Rotonda as an object of local and national importance, as it was before the 1980s. However, the logic of restoring a particular path conceals several pitfalls. First, doing so anchors the movement in a specific, pre-conceived notion of public space, one "controlled" and accessible only to certain social groups (the so-called "good" people). This definition explicitly excludes those of "unwanted" social groups, like homeless people, but also those of alternative social groups – graffiti artists, rockers, punks, hipsters. Another pitfall is in the different Soviet architecture and monuments and their interpretations. For example, there are many Romanian-speaking activists who consider Chisinau overloaded with traces of the Russian and Soviet presence and believe that some of these should disappear completely.[33] The city has not yet established a long-term identity strategy – one that would succeed in integrating the different architectural and historic heritages of the city. This is why, even if the initiative of the Rotonda is an excellent and successful one, too few Romanian-speaking activists find themselves within a project of restoring a Soviet architectural monument. Many of them would prefer a different form of restoration that would include the destruction of pre-Soviet era monuments. Therefore activism confronts a variety of seemingly incompatible restoration discourses, a fact which the community of activists has not yet overcome.
- Another challenge for the Rotonda initiative is a cultural one. The cultural actions for revitalization of the zone have consisted until now of events of traditional or mainstream culture: fanfare music, dance, poetry readings. During a conference dedicated to the public spaces of Chisinau, one of the organizers said that the space was still "spared" the interventions of informal and alternative groups such as rockers, punks, and others. How the community will react to a potential cultural intrusion of this kind, and or how and whether it will succeed in integrating the image of the Soviet idyll is still to be determined.

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33 See for example the statements of historian and politician Octavian Tacu during television show Publika Report from the 14th of October 2013. http://www.publika.md/editie/_371_2576111.html

Conclusion

The social movements in Moldova described above have, without a doubt, commonalities with other similar movements in surrounding countries. The dependence of the movements on the Internet and online social networks; the use of information technologies for mobilization and organization; the effort to enlarge the national and local political discussion by including new and relevant topics, such as urban citizenship, the right for the city, local democracy, and transparency of decisional processes; the inequality of power and resources both among activist groups and among big businesses and local or national authorities—these are some elements which can be found in other capitals of post-Socialist countries as well. Yet some aspects – such as the separation of the communities of activists by ethnic and linguistic criteria, cultural and ideological separation concerning the Communist city heritage, the activist efforts to counteract traditional political actors' attempts to co-opt successful movements for their own interests—are unique to the Moldovan context.

Due to all these complexities, it is quite difficult to paint a definitive picture of urban activism in Chisinau. Still, I would permit myself two preliminary conclusions:

- Even if these social movements were to further develop only under the worst circumstances – that is, if they were dissolved or co-opted by other political actors – they would still have made a significant contribution in that they introduced new themes in political debates: of public space, of domination and control over public space, and of urban democracy. These themes have already solidified and found a place within the agenda of current political debates in various forms (in topics such as protection of architectural heritage, or preventing exclusion of certain sexual or religious minorities in public spaces, and actions for revitalization of public spaces). We expect them to be discussed more intensely in the upcoming elections.
- An indirect but very important effect of these movements is the recovery of protest as an instrument of creating political pressure. It allows us to propose new forms of political organizing and co-operation outside the traditional political field, and to use various communicative means in the arts, such as performance, to express an important message. These elements will help build an active urban citizenship and give citizens new, innovative means to get involved.