THE MAKING OF A HERO IN ROMANIAN PROTEST CULTURES. THE CASE OF 2017 STREET RALLIES

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Abstract

In the context of the Romanian recent protests without leaders, the possibility for some authority figures to stand up to the streets wishes created the setting for the emergence of heroic actions. This is the case with the Romanian president who by direct actions, public image strategies and feedback from the social media activists managed to endorse the street demand to further energise the unrest masses in their attempt to gain legitimacy by contesting authority.

Keywords: *culture of conflict; heroic hybridity; remediation of heroes.*

1. Introduction

Over the last almost four years, the Romanian civil society faced a surprisingly strong awakening. The spark that kindled the massive street rallies from early 2017 stemmed from the unhidden wish of the newly instated government to alter the penal codes to pardon a series of corruptions deeds. This was seen as being for the direct benefit of some high-raking governing party members who faced criminal charges based on the very infractions to be decriminalised.

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Aside with the constant online activism, enabled by the eased access to connection technology, there were also a few cases of massive street rallies and at least one episode of clashes between the protesters and the riot police. Yet, there is one notable aspect about the street rallies which aligns the Romanian civil society movement to the other cultures of protest from around the world: the street with no leader. This represents a protest during which no singular voices address the unrest masses, no leaders emerge from among the protesters and no politicians descend among the crowd to support their cause in loud speeches. As such, the street with no leader equals to the power of crowds in which the salience of generalised disobedience replaces the silence of the leaders motivating the citizens.

However, despite the lack of protest leaders present amongst the street rallies, the online activity allows the development of some particular figures who tend to become representative based on a few types of deeds they get involved in. They are mainly independent journalists who are constantly present at the protests and who chase various political figures asking awkward questions, all while streaming live on social media their undertakings. Additionally, some of members of the civil society with a long-lasting presence in protest activities, turn to crowdsourcing journalism mimicking free press activities. But apart from these, there are numerous cases in which the online civil society converts some small acts into authentic "campaign viral" (Postill 2014) adding up to the whole protest narrative. Against this backdrop, the cases when the Romanian presidents stands up against the unpopular, immoral, and, sometimes, illegal governmental acts tend to supersede the constitutionally permitted actions by "heroic" deeds in civil society's narrative.

This paper will look at some of the strategies of converting both the constitutional actions of the Romanian president and his common actions into heroic deeds of an ultimate landmark, in the fight to restore life on the normal track in a rule of law state, in the contexts of protests against the decriminalisation of corruption deeds. Additionally, the transition from the last years to the new forms of protest, mainly by incorporating the online civil activism, should be observed not only from the point of view of these collaborative, technologically-driven

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innovations, but also from that of the remediation of old protest practices, such as the construction of the political mythologies and the profile of the *political hero*.

2. Political Myths and Heroic Figures

Looking at an overview of the concept of myth, De Vriese (2017) identified three key points of alteration that the political myth understanding suffers from: firstly, the common language association of myth with fiction and untruth, secondly, the overemphasis of the connection between the political myth and political propaganda stemming from Cassirer's analysis of Nazism (dubbing the former as artificialized tools used as political weapon), and thirdly, as a rhetorical discourse aimed at promoting ideological wordings.

Another aspect that may provide consistency to the somewhat problematic understanding of myth is overlaying it with terminology from the anthropological perspective. From Frazer (1994) onwards, either in functionalist or structuralist traditions, the myth, as a narrative of origins, was passed down as a way of conceptualizing the world in the form of "phantom realities of other cultures that anthropologists study" (Overing 1997: 4). This was in sharp discontinuity with reality, but, as such, it places mythos in either a remote space or in a distant time. In either case, it anchors it within a reality apart from that of the present day.

Without getting deeper into the system of emic-etic opposition by casting light on to the understanding of the mythical narration, the relation between reality and the lack of it is a remnant the understanding of myth in anthropological tradition. However, Tudor (1972) tackles this dichotomy in his equation of myth and history, by rethinking the traditional views on the nature of events from the binary opposition between falsehood and truth, in terms of acceptance and appropriateness. Tudor based his thesis on the principles of selection which both the historian and the myth-maker resort to. His conclusion is as such: Historians "cite evidence" whereas "myth-makers" selection is centred upon "mak[ing] sense of an existing state of affairs" (Tudor 1972: 124). By reducing his

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analysis to the political myth, Tudor feels that this category is the most susceptible to selective incorporation; including real events and figures that have been reinterpreted to serve a particular case or purpose. He adds that if an event brings clarifications, it increases the likelihood of being accepted by the audience, even if it contradicts the historian outlooks. What Tudor implies is that the power of contextualizing events to appeals to the audience outweighs the veracity of scientific logic. This is partly backed by Tamse (1975) who shares the same logic in identifying an event based on either sources or on perception. However, he places myth and history alongside each other not in terms of reciprocal rejection, but rather of smooth complementarity.

Within the literature, there are some who dismiss the apparent oppositions between fact and fiction, such as Bottici (2007: 132) draws on the "acute need for a symbolic mediation of political experience" in the very human nature. Accordingly, he rewords the Blumenberg's understanding of myth as works on myth, casts political myths as an ongoing process of group appropriations "which can provide significance to their political conditions and experience" (Bottici/Challard 2006: 316). Thus, if Tudor's understanding of myth was selective incorporation to suit the context, Bottici's paradigm grasps at the idea of myths as narratives which function as lenses (Bennett 1980: 167) which alter the perception of the world. This perception regulates the action within a given group with a narrow focus. Although the pattern is unchanged, what fills the meaning-creating gaps is altered, or, as De Vriese's concludes, myths are "successful survivals in a creative process of selection and modification, namely, as those variants which best succeed in providing guidance for social action" (De Vriese 2017: 816), thus creating the utmost practical sense of myths.

A salient exemplification of such dynamics may be seen in the development of the myth of the hero. It was subject to a minute approach from a comparative mythology perspective in Campbell's (2004 [1949]) deeply psychoanalytically based text, where the figure of the hero stands the test of unification in the form of *monomyth*. If viewed as a composition within the three-phase rite of passage structure, according to Campbell, the mythical figure of the hero has been lost in present day imagination due to a series of reasons. Campbell posits that

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"[t]he hero has died as modern man […]. His second task and deed therefore […] is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach us the lesson he has learnt of life renewed" (Campbell 2004 [1949]: 18). It can be argued that this assertion is valid if the projection which was made outside the realm of mythical thinking constitutes the basis for revealing the potentialities of heroic deed within our reality.

What is interesting here is the *potentiality* of heroic action. Although it can be argued that the figure has dissipated, one may argue that samples of heroic-like behaviours or actions still have fundamental reasons to occur. These create feelings of awe or at minimum simple admiration since they are unattainable (or seem unattainable) by the majority. Furthermore, such acts and behaviours stand out firstly, due to their outstanding nature, and secondly because their relevance for their audience (Sullivan/Venter 2005). Furthermore, investigations of a psychological nature have revealed a rather important number of adult individuals who disclosed that they still have heroes. This is despite the apparent blurred borders among an array of public figures and actions, and that it was impossible to identify at least one single trait common to all heroic figures (Kinsella *et al.* 2015).

It is this diversity of heroes' characterisations of their actions and features that has determined the diversity of theoretical models or taxonomies that scholars have developed over time. Their analysis of the perception heroes have in the eyes of their audiences have crystallised a series of features of heroes. Based on several contexts leading to perceived heroic acts (including events from the Holocaust or those that lead to Carnegie Foundation awards), Oliner (2003) composed his classification of how people viewed heroic action in connection to "conventional altruism". He used a matrix with four distinct features: help, risk, lack of reward, and voluntary determination. This matrix enabled him to envisage two large classes of heroic altruism: "professionally trained" and "non-professional unpaid" individuals. The latter is divided by whether they are involved in one-off or repeated acts of heroism (Oliner 2003: 21-22).

Within the same level of perception of heroic deeds, Fried (1993) linked "heroic" action to the system of values held by the audience or group in which the heroic actions unfold before. She propounds a grid

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in which various types of individuals perceive heroism against the opposition of private and domestic settings where the actions occur. As a result, the four empirical categories she identified underscore differently both the nature and the quality of the heroic acts. Thus, a progressive understanding cherishes the "struggles against oppression" (Fried 1993: 500), a scenario where the defenders cling on to heroicness of military actions, those who nurture projects within domestic and personal settings, and finally entrepreneurs who act against "critical actions and every day types of heroism" (1993: 506).

Furthermore, the heroes' actions could have a core root based on their perception of their existence. Whether they are personal or public heroes, professional or not, or paid or unpaid, the heroes' actions idealisation may be derived from the need to escape the linear dullness of individual life. Coughlan *et al.* (2017) found the propensity to heroicness stemmed from the need to escape boredom, which they defined as a "lack of perceived meaning and challenge" (2017: 457). The authors discuss that the two key components that create the meaning in life are "the presence of" and "the search for" and since such heroic figures "serve as a source of meaning" (2017: 459), it appears to be psychologically natural that there is an everlasting tendency to organize and arrange the lives of others in accordance to such models.

In a similar vein, Allison and Goethals (2015) dug deep into the reasons determining the need for heroes within reality and found them coagulated in external stimuli. As such, they proposed the concept of "heroic leadership dynamic" in which the narratives of heroes "fulfil important cognitive and emotional needs, such as our need for wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, and growth" (2015: 189). Such dynamic materializes at an individual level with an epistemic function; in the sense that it offers a source of "knowledge and wisdom" and, additionally, provides an energizing function, which "inspire[s] us and promote[s] personal growth" (Allison/Goethals 2015: 190).

While it is true that their approach stemmed from a therapeutic process, it can be concluded that the energizing function is the strongest to manifest within us, especially within the political mythologies surrounding heroic figures. This assertion can be supported with a general view on heroism and political mythologies as being specific to

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certain groups which some build for a particular act of heroism, while others pre-exist the actual manifestation of a certain act. In both cases, the adequacy of a certain narrative to support an individual need is paramount in the way that the individual selects the representative figure. This was supported by Allison and Goethals (2015), who further interpreted the Johnny Carson effect as representation of such selection. This is in the sense that various figures spike interest with audiences depending on each individual's need, state or feelings. Additionally, it could be argued that a group may display such selection behaviour if a certain narrative fits their perception of the course of events to the same extent.

The final condition is that the hero must not always be remembered by the outstanding, uniqueness, and maybe frantic acts that he or she may enact or be part of. As Strate (1995) puts it, the hero must also have a visual identity within contemporary visual societies. By elaborating on McLuhan's global village theories (1994 [1964]), in conjunction with Walter Ong's views on orality (1982) which are both set against the theories of visual perception, Strate feels that whenever a visual representation of the hero is involved, such hero's actions are enhanced and felt more significantly.

In conclusion, a hero is the pinnacle of otherness when set against and compared to the members of the group that he or she mobilises. By integrating three major types of feature: the willingness to take risks, the performance of otherwise unattainable actions, and the generation of behaviours and reactions, (s/)he is set apart from the masses. In this way, the sense of difference (at least at the level of the latter feature) is included in the following that the hero attains including the members of the group where the hero consciousness is present. A hero always appears to be imagined as a bearer of the utmost levels of pervasive and positive traits of character. Conversely, van Tourhout (2017), drawing on the same idea of context-dependant nature of the heroicness and interpreting it as a method to "cope with reality" (van Tourhout 2017: 457), rejects the idea of a composite hero, termed a *hybrid*, which is made up of not only of superlatives, but rather of a whole array of features that include those that would not normally be in line with the heroic persona. In his view, the hybrid hero collects the features of traditional and flawed heroes and of villains alike and combines them. Even though

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the author based his theoretical construct predominantly on fictional productions, by observing these elements within the contemporary arena of political mythology and ritual may prove him right. The villain-esque features of a political hero do not mean the full annulment of his heroic status nor do they equate to the exclusion from the community from which his heroicness emerged, but rather just accepting such composite persona within the same groups is a reality that is not to be denied.

3. Methodology and Research Field

In the lines that follow I will turn the attention to the way in which the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis has been linked to the anti-government protest movements as of 2015 onwards and particularly on how his actions are deemed heroic or contested inside the same support group, following the *hybrid hero* pattern. His status is thus not built stemming from *post factum gazes*, but rather from an *ongoing routine* of interactions with the parliamentary majority. He pictures thus a hero in the making, with various steps taken as responses to the actions both of the political arena and of the street.

As methodology, the study is mainly based on discourse analysis and ethnographic observation and is conducted online, at the level of grassroot activism, on the Facebook groups and communities *#rezistența*, Dacian Cioloș, Laura Codruta Kovesi (their official pages), *Români împotriva corupție*, *Susțin platforma România 100*, and *600000 pentru rezistenta*, the President's official Facebook page, the news platfoms Hotnews (www.hotnews.ro) and Mediafax (www.mediafax.ro), and their respective Facebook pages, the online version of the print newspapers *Adevărul* (www.adevarul.ro) and *Gândul* (www.gandul.ro). Such a selection is based on that the purpose of the paper is not to analyse the President's image as a parallel between the supporting and the contesting discourse, but to see how this image is built in a group of (quasi)support. It is (quasi)support because the political affiliation of people commenting, liking, sharing or uploading content is not clearly printed, but rather deducted. Some content or practices may easily be context-determined and may not stem from clear political affiliation. It

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may be possible that a part of these people shares different political views but are active here simply because they contest political parties in power.

Furthermore, for reasons relevance, just a random fraction of the plethora of instances was selected for analysis although much more material is available to back-up the conclusions: the cases of direct confrontation and the construction of a physical image.

4. The Making of the Hero

Once a party or an individual is voted for an official capacity, it is natural to embark on a road of popularity erosion since the political class is always to blame for everything not conforming to the voters' expectations. However, the Romanian political context of the time enables the existence of a president supported by a political party which does not hold the parliamentary majority. In terms of conflicting powers, although the president has rather limited constitutional duties in term of internal affairs, he can play an important part in some key areas such as the Parliament activity (he can reject the promulgation of laws delaying the moment when they come into force), the naming of the prime minister (or, rather the rejection of proposals made by the majority) and so on.

As such, when street rallies against the newly elected Parliament's attempt to decriminalize certain corruption deeds gained momentum, the president appeared as a last bastion on the path of the retention of the rule of law which was strongly put to the test. Suddenly, the president who had not featured excellent speaker's skills or an active role as a participant in the internal political life became a sort of a panacea ally in the fight against legislation alterations.

Against this backdrop, each of his acts or public speeches harnessed in the protesters' eyes a potential heroicness (Campbell 2004 [1949]) since they correspond to the expectation of the street. Additionally, such acts or speeches tend to be strongly recontextualised to fit the contexts of political-civil society turmoil (Tudor 1972), or to offer the possibility of an alternative perception on same events (Bottici/Challard 2006). Each micronarrative centred upon the

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presidential persona disclosing a position against the parliamentary majority amasses to the grand narrative of the protest movement.

4.1. Unmuting the Hero

As said before, the Romanian president's communication strategy is built upon a scarcity of public interventions. Yet, his short and very oriented speeches compensate for his lack loquacity. This may simply be a strategic move[2] in his pungent tendencies to counteract the unpopular decisions or politicians. Furthermore, such strategy is a well-balanced approach in terms of the reactions such actions may determine among the publics he addresses. The longer the time between the sanctionable actions and his public intervention, the higher the level of expectation amongst the civil society. This delay functions cumulatively while the expected intervention fuses more the frustration gathered by the protesters which see their efforts almost in vain.

In the political mythologies and, subsequently, in the construction of the political heroes, such unseen but implicit presence is considered a sign of superlative strengths because "the more a power can be felt without being seen, the stronger it gets" (Bottici/Challard 2006: 331). The absence and, eventually, the emergence at the proper time set the grounds for converting the power into heroic features. The president's positions are thus the expected feedback to the direct requirements of the street.

But in a narrative of the construction of the hero, based on the monomyth formula, the hero must face the opposing force in direct confrontation to consolidate his position. If the discourse against adversaries may be viewed as well as part of the heroic confrontation, facing the "enemy" in direct encounter is what builds the best this status.

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[2] This strategy is constant in the president's approach, being employed from the early stages of streets protest that anticipated the mass street rally from the beginning of 2017. Following the tragic fire from the Colectiv Club, the street protests were six days in when he descended for the first time among the protesters.

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The president-cum-hero's direct confrontation in the sense of face-to-face interactions were in the context of the 2017 massive protests rather limited. Yet, at least two examples become relevant in the sense of the creation of a hero among the protesters with no leaders: the participation in the government meeting where the bill to alter the criminal code was expected to be passed, and the second, the attendance to the counter-rally organised by the parliamentary majority in front of the presidential palace.

As previously said, the linchpin of the massive public disobedience the Romanian civil society showcased was the decriminalization of some corruption deeds. The rumours about this intention turned into certainty as increasingly larger numbers of members of the Parliament and government, as well as high-ranking party members acclaimed the necessity of such modification with the only purpose to avoid alleged mistrials and abuses of the anti-corruption prosecutors. As a need of urgency, the parliamentary majority decided not to follow the lengthy path of a bill passed by the Parliament, but rather to go the easier way of passing a government ordinance which will immediately produce effects and which will bypass the president who has a veto right against the law.

In such context, the first direct confrontation occurs when the president decided to attend the government meeting. Although allowed by the Romanian Constitution to partake in and to preside such meeting, such right was seldom exercised. However, the president's intention was blunt and put in the clearest words possible[3]:

> "There is one elephant in the room, but it cannot be seen. There are two elephants: the pardoning ordinance and the criminal code alteration ordinance. It's obvious that I have already talked to the prime minister earlier this morning, and he's told me that the discussion has already taken place with some colleagues from the government and it would not be a part of the additional agenda…"[4].

Highly praised amongst the anti-corruption protesters, the confrontation not only increased the admiration for finally standing up

[3] All the texts cited here are in the author's translation.

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z7vMfFZzWM, retrieved on August 24th, 2020.

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for the retention of the criminal deeds in the penal code, but additionally aligned to the already expected pattern of interaction with political adversaries. One commenter on the news agency Hotnews webpage manages to summarise and simultaneously unveil the presidential strategy:

> "Last evening, we were all in high dudgeon since Iohannis appeared to accept benumbed PSD's (governing party, my note) manoeuvres. Today he went to the government (although he declared elegantly that the prime minister had invited him), had a confidential talk with Grindeanu [the prime minister, my note] and Iordache [minister of justice, my note], allowed Grindeanu to announce that no talks about the amnesty would take place, not to chip away his prestige. When Grindeanu tried to avoid talking, Iohannis took the mike and call a spade a spade, being visible annoyed (M. Popa[5])".

This comment epitomizes the very meaning of the heroic perception as expectation of the uncommon act. Firstly, this showcases the need to incorporate the accrued power in the form of the physical presence, as a final point of a long expectation. Secondly, it acknowledges the potentiality of an outstanding act to countervail the imminence of a potentially harmful action. And finally, it sets the grounds for the identification of a pattern of direct interaction after a period of absence.

The same strategy appears to be employed identically in the next episode of direct confrontation. If the attendance to the government meeting only delayed the alteration of legislation, which eventually took place a couple of weeks later, the next confrontation places the president in front of those who support the contested political majority.

Immediately after the modification of laws by the government emergency ordinance, people took to the streets in great number, pressuring the issuer to take a step back and to cancel the bills which eventually happened. Irrespective of this reparatory action, the protests did not rest, but surprisingly increased in intensity.

As a counteraction measure, the social-democrats organized – although they constantly stated the movement was spontaneous – a

[5] https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-21539621-moment-inedit-sedinta-guvern-klaus-iohannis-nu-lasat-presa-iasa-din-sala-pana-nu-vorbit-despre-cei-doi-elefanti-care-nu-vrea-vorbeasca-nimeni.htm, retrieved on August 24th, 2020.

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recurrent counter-protest aimed at the president in front of the presidential administration.

The second confrontation, three days after the first manifestation, places Iohannis in front of a small group of people located on the foot walk opposite the entrance to the Cotroceni Palace, protesting on a blinding blizzard. After a very short face to face meeting, Iohannis justified this confrontation in terms of an administrative duty which makes him listen to all the people who have different opinions, irrespective of their political views.

The descending among the contesting crowd may be seen as an act of bravery in the algorithm of building the heroic aura. This is not to be seen as an act of courage in the sense that his presence here might be subject to perils, but as extraordinary by comparison to his peer political leader, who failed to address their contesters. As a result, the heroic construction derives from the opposition between the urge to act and the lack of action.

The hero's extraordinary actions are socially constructed, namely they become heroic in the cultural contexts which allow their creation. Actions tend to stand out as heroic either against the backdrop passivity or against irrelevance. It is not clear what triggered the lack of a similar engagement between the governing party and its contesters, but this inactivity backfired dramatically as an augmentation of the president's approaching its contesters.

Finally, the outstanding nature of heroic action must be additionally read in conjunction with the willingness to take risks which ordinary people would normally avoid. One such risk may be analysed in connection with the first example of confrontation and must be weighed against the possibility of the parliamentary majority to act against the president by deploying measure to sanction him for standing up against their political will.

The Romanian constitution allows the Parliament to initiate and to vote a presidential suspension procedure in case he performs acts that breach the constitutional boundaries. This has already happened in Romania before, when the previous president was subject to the suspension procedure. Although this ability was often invoked on the

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realm of political debate, this time, against the street pressure, the Parliament did not resort to such final measure.

In other words, the risks of the outstanding actions shaping the heroic persona equate here to the risks of total annihilation namely, the hero being voted out from the political arena. In a general sense, this risk is viewed as the risk that the group in which the heroic narrative is build is not willing to take. But in this case the suspension is not shared among the members of such group but rather among other unique representatives with same attributes. As such, the risk does not materialize in present circumstances, but it is rather seen in the history of that representative function. Iohannis does not have other group members compare with, yet he might be compared with other presidents before him.

To partly conclude, the presidential actions in the confrontation formula turn to a valuable asset in the context of street protester's demands. As such, the public discontent in connection to the attack on justice creates a suitable setting to justify and to support an action against the very root cause of the villain-esque threat posed to the normal course of life in a state of law. Furthermore, in the context of street pressure against an unlawful form of exercising the authority with detrimental results, the hero's actions tend to converts in critical steps to legitimise and enhance the public wrath.

4.2. The Heroic Posture – or the Hero with a Face

It is rather common that one political figure's staff may resort to engineered contexts to shed favourable light on one person or the other (as it is most probably the case with picture no. 2). But what interests more for the sake this analysis is the echo such instances lead to in the form of content generation in the online debate around politics.

Picture no. 2 shows the president side by side with Gen. Ciucă, Romanian Chief of Defence at that time after having descended on the airfield, with a Spartan Aircraft silhouette on the background and it was uploaded on his official Facebook page.

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Picture 1. The red jacket[6]



Picture 2. The president at a military airfield



Picture 3. Social Democrats' former president[7], today imprisoned for corruption

6 https://www.national.ro/news/iohannis-si-a-pus-geaca-rosie-ca-sa-goleasca-puscariile-603163.html, retrieved on August 24th, 2020.

7 https://evz.ro/liviu-dragnea-liber-complet-judecata-sfideaza.html, retrieved on August 24th, 2020.

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This image may open discussions on multiple layers of meaning, especially because it generated a great number of memes picturing the (super)hero posture the president displayed and, additionally, because it forms an authentic piece of campaign viral in the grand narrative of contestation movement. The intertextual comic nature of the memelore generated by it is enlarged upon as a strategy of fusing the fight against the corrupt political class (Stoicescu forth.). What interests here is the strategy of contrast, either explicit, as in picture no. 2, or implicit, as it is the case with the inclusion of picture no. 3 in the contestation narrative – employed in the protest discourse.

This opens the discussion for Strate's opinion that a hero "will also come under increasing control by audiences" (Strate 1995: 37). In this case, such control is achieved a means of a crowdsourced regulatory process, shaped either as visible direct textual feedback or as intertextual productions to reveal expectations or to make clear a certain way of perceiving the heroic persona, all of which materialise in the context of the conforming to the protesters' expectation to identify a form of authority taking their side.

The purpose of the heroic posture becomes transparent from a fist glance in picture no. 2. The crafting of the hero image by hinting at the warrior architype is done by a process of assimilation. Iohannis is not a member of the military thus cannot impersonate such role. What he can do instead is to associate his image with that of the highest position in the Romanian armed forces. Furthermore, the blurred background which technically enables the eye to focus on the central two individuals may very well be interpreted as hinting at the importance of the representative figures and not of the logistics or the military as a group.

On the other hand, the picture further contributes to the exceptional nature of the hero this time embodying the excellence of action in an extraordinary physical presence. This PR bait appears to function smoothly since the picture triggers immediately large numbers of commentaries centred upon the theme of outstanding appearance.

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The large batch of commentaries[8] enlarge upon the contrast with the general: "couldn't anyone photoshop the military man on the right side thinner" (S.D[9].), "Mr Ciucă could go easier on shawarma" (T.A.). In terms of regulatory feedback, such contract may not be read as directed to Gen. Ciucă, but, in fact, they are contrast formula to enhance the visible hero's image.

But above all, against the many commentaries acknowledging the charisma the presidential hero possesses, there are other which disclose the strategy behind the image. At the same time, they connect this strategy to other president's, but set apart the purposes of the creation:

> "I am gland on the other hand that no petty joker came with the idea to show his naked torso similar to Putin riding on lions or strangling bears. (S.D.)".

In the similar vein to joggling with physical appearance, the Facebook users themselves resort to a similar strategy of contrast. Such examples include the routine of making memes stemming from various official pictures, but the most valuable is the inclusion of an implicit game of images in a sort of meta-narrative of the online critical discourses. This means that certain images become campaign virals at a certain moment in the development of events but remain in the public attention to punctuate various other aspects of political debate or of the discussions in the culture of conflict.

This is the case with pictures no. 1 and 3 which are constantly used as a reminder of the presidential hero. The "red jacket president" became a symbol of defiance of the parliamentary majority (red being their colour). The bad teeth head of social-democrats, on the hand, stands at the exact opposite side of the spectrum of charisma. This way, the collage with the head of state and the head of the Chamber of Deputies (as it is the case of picture 4, below) becomes a sort of a landmark in the equation of confrontation. It is not a direct clash but it is

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[8] All the commetaries cited here are from the president's official Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/klausiohannis. All the captions are given in the author's translation.

[9] Given that all the texts cited in this paper are from a public Facebook page, only the initials of the users' names were given, for reasons of privacy.

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symbolically linked to the opposition between the (impromptu) hero and the (constant) villain.



Picture 4. Dragnea and Iohannis[10]

4.3. The Hybrid Hero

As said before, the presidential hero status is expedient by the incorporation of a generalised desire of the protesters to stop the legislation modification and, at a larger scale, the social democrats. This final part of my approach to the remediated construction of the political hero attempts to analyse what kind of reactions are triggered when the hero falls aside the generally acceptable deeds.

As stated from the very beginning, the analysis focuses only on support groups since only at this level we can clearly notice unbiased opinions. If one looks at a hero's profile within all actions generated in the wider context of protest, especially one in which the group it hosts is highly divided, then such heroes will definitely fall under the category of hybridity. This is because the same action or behaviour will be seen in opposite term within either side.

The political context chosen for the analysis of hybridity is triggered by the president's nomination of the third prime minister from the social democrats, after two previous cases in which the social democrats led to the destitution of their own governments either directly, as a result of a non-confidence vote, or, indirectly, by withdrawing of political support leading to resignation, in the case of the second prime minister.

[10] https://playtech.ro/stiri/dragnea-desfiintat-pe-iohannis-la-tv-ce-a-spus-de-referendum-12505, retrieved on August 24th, 2020.

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Refusing to nominate a third prime minister from the social democrats equates to the threat of being suspended. Although the general expectation was to decline the proposal, Iohannis eventually accepted a prime minister from their side.

The wave of reactions determined by his decision is very revealing in the construction of hybridity. They enable to see how such profile is built in a game of strong disapproval as immediate reaction to an action lacking conformity to an expected heroic code of conduct.

Due to the lack of space, only two such commentaries stating the inappropriate of the compromise and the consequences of playing along will be cited:

> "Well done, Mr Iohannis, good job! You've given them the key so that they won't struggle with a picklock on those laws. The millions of people voting for you and trusting you are now thanking you. Now go to sleep, you are tired from all the effort you put into the good for the Romanians. We'll wake you up when the country is done! (D.M.)",

and

> "I am NOT interested in the political calculations. I am NOT interested you are afraid of being suspended. I am NOT interested you are afraid of instability. I will NOT give you my vote, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCE, if you nominate a prime minister from the side if the TRAITORS and the CORRUPTS. […] Weigh thoroughly what you'll do. NO COWARDNESS! (C.C.F.)".

In any case, such positions of disapproval or dissociation from an act which does not conform to the public expectation does not immediately alter the heroic status. Conversely, it fortifies it in the sense of accepting a heroic conduct with inconsistencies to the formula of outstanding actions.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Irrespective of the source of interpretation and definition, the construction of the heroic posture of a political leader is context dependent. The context of the creation of the presidential hero is strongly connected to

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the values shared by the community inside which the heroic image unfolds. In the case of the protest without leader, the president-hero's action tends to become a meaning making undertaking (Coughlan *et al.* 2017), particularly because the president endorses the will of the street. Thus, the street vs. political authority conflict translates into a conflict between a civil society which finds an ally in one authoritarian figure and the other fraction of state authority.

Additionally, such an ally which resorts to both centripetal and centrifugal actions in connection to the street expectations tends to supersede the image of the hero who possesses the strengths and takes the risk unattainable otherwise by the ordinary members of the group by a strategy of conforming to and deflecting from the sense the groups expect to see by this actions. As a result, the willingness to accept a hero made up of extraordinary qualities becomes replaced by the determination to accept the hero as composed of compromises and unique risk-taking actions. In fact, if one accepts Coughlan *et al.* (2017) statement according to which heroes are a "tool to reinforce meaningfulness" (2017: 465) for those who already have it, then it becomes obvious why such a hero is accepted. He stems from a group which he duplicates and thus he incorporates the features it has. This is the reason why the aura of heroes from the traditional mythologies is replaced by the acceptance of sometimes faulty actions in contemporary political mythologies. The hero may not be the exceptional character, taking risks no one else would be willing to take and performing actions out of bounds for the rest of the members of the group, but in this contemporary political mythology on the making, re-enacting the meaning-making actions of a group suffices to achieve heroic features in context of unrest.

The meaning-making actions in this particular context stem from a very elaborated strategy of absences and fulminant emergence. In fact, Iohannis's strategy creates the setting for a leader to stand up for the wished of the street. His action in direct conformation come to fill up a void of heroic representation. Although the tensions accumulate and there is an acute need to find supporting landmarks, the potential ally postpones his appearance. This is probably why when the silent power takes a visible stand, its actions appear to be heroic in their intrinsic

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nature. At the same time, circularly, such actions stemming from the group expectation tend to energise further the group in its future actions.

Finally, the remediated heroic actions in contexts of cultures of protest are subject to the possibility of both offering a feedback to the hero's actions and drop hints to a possible future course.

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