

Denunciations as Civic Acts: The Romanian Middle Class and its Battles for Justice

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Abstract

This text deals with denunciations from people in the city of Timișoara, Romania. It focuses first on Cristian Brâncovan, a so-called “national champion of justice”, who has been leading an online campaign against pickpockets since 2016. He is photographing suspects, publishes their photo on his Facebook page, and occasionally harasses them in the street. Most if not all of his suspects are of Roma origins. Second, the article focuses on anonymous denunciations that the police pick up and use to legitimize arrests, evictions and harassment. I argue that such practices of denunciation, including Brâncovan’s campaign, are an instrument through which the Romanian middle class upholds its need for an ethical form of politics. In this way, denunciations reinforce the state’s repression against marginal groups. Denouncing is seen as a civic act, one by which the denouncer fulfills their duty as a citizen and contributes to public order and security.

SOCIOLINK - Platforma de Sociologie și Antropologie Socială (www.sociolink.ro)

16.01.2018

<http://www.sociolink.ro/denunciations-as-civic-acts-the-romanian-middle-class-and-its-battles-for-justice/>



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Introduction

In February 2017 thousands of people in Romania joined a national wide protest against corruption. This protest was dubbed “Rezist” and it was mainly aimed at the corrupt political class, and specifically at the Social Democrat Party. People were demanding the upholding of the rule of law, and an end to corruption practices and large scale theft. In Timișoara, one of the major Romanian cities, one young man was enthusiastically organizing the local protests, speaking out against local thieves and their alleged connections to the “big thieves” in the Parliament. His name was Cristi Brâncovan, and for him calling out corruption during the “Rezist” protests was merely the extension of his one year old campaign against Timișoara’s pocket thieves. In April 2016 Brâncovan, armed with a megaphone, went to the tram station in one of the central marketplaces of the city, and spent few hours warning the passersby that the trams are filled with pickpockets. His speech pointed out that Timișoara is “an unsafe city”, where the authorities and the Police do nothing to stop the serious situation caused by the thieves. He alleged that the pickpockets have “thousands of victims in one month” (Stoian 2016). Brâncovan also called upon the authorities to intervene, so that people would not reach the point where they would “do justice for themselves”.

I argue in this text that the practices of denunciation performed by Brâncovan and others are an instrument through which the Romanian middle class upholds its need for an ethical form of politics and thus reinforces the state’s repression against marginal groups. The denouncers claim a specific form of justice that oppresses whoever does not conform to the Western civilized standards of normativity. The collaboration and complicity of the people of Timișoara with the authorities highlights the fact that denouncing is seen as a civic act, one by which the dweller of the city fulfills her duty as a citizen.

Enikő Vincze (2012) argued that after 1989, the subjectivity of the Romanian citizen has been reinvented in parallel with the buttressing of state authority. This reinvention developed both through nationalist discourses and through European and civilizational discourses. These two discourses complement each other in the “Rezist” protests. These protests denounced corruption as a pathogen, as a crime that needs to be punished in order to clear the nation of its reactive, communist and non-Western elements (Crimethinc.com 2017). The protests legitimize the repressive forces of the Romanian state in the name of civic attitudes guided by middle class values (Poenaru 2017). As one observer put it, “the fight indeed is not against corruption, but on the ownership of the instruments of justice, from one group of interests to another” (Platon 2018). This new civism is inscribed in a larger effort to reinforce the state’s authority in its repressive rather than social dimension.

The first section introduces the concept of denunciation and its stakes. The second section outlines the Romanian context – its neoliberal governmental policies, its burgeoning middle class with its ethical concerns that translate into the criminalization of the poor, and how all this is coming together in the city of Timișoara, which is today the epicenter of Romania’s middle class civism. Subsequently, the following sections present the two empirical vignettes: the case of Cristi Brâncovan and its campaign against pickpockets, and the activities of the Timișoara Local Police that reflect anonymous denunciations.

These two empirical illustrations are not meant to be exhaustive case studies. They merely show two sides of this phenomenon: on the one hand a visible figure of the hero who takes it upon himself to find the evildoers, and on the other hand the less visible but similarly powerful collective *persona* of the anonymous

public, whose discourse and actions are made visible by the press releases of the Police. I chose to show all this in the city of Timișoara first of all because it is where the phenomenon of denunciations is most visible in Romania, and secondly, because among Romanian cities it is the one with the best reputation as an “European” city. Methodologically, this article investigates the actions of the denouncers and analyses their discourses solely through the traces they leave in the online media, and especially in the press reports of the Timișoara Local Police. I focus on the period 2016 – 2018 because it is the time when the denunciations became more frequent and their effects more visible. It is also the period that coincides with the rise of the new Romanian middle class through the anti corruption campaign and the “Rezist” protests.

On denunciations

In one of the more thorough analyses of denunciation, it is defined as a form of communication “containing accusations of wrongdoing by other citizens or officials and implicitly or explicitly calling for punishment”; this communication is spontaneous, it is articulated by individual citizens and directed towards an authority (Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1996: 747). Typically, the denouncer denies any personal interest in their act, referring only to a higher interest – such as state values, the public good or the civic duty. Denunciations are voluntarily articulated by citizens, but there are instances where the state solicits its citizens to denounce the crimes they witness (Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1996: 748). While the latter is mostly seen as a characteristic of totalitarian societies, I will show in this paper that in a democratic society such as Romania both patterns can coexist. Some of the denunciations that I analyze are made following the denouncer’s own initiative, while others are made at the behest of appeals from the Police.

The practice of denunciation implies the presence of an enemy, of an “other” that threatens the society (Lucas 1996: 769). The denouncer experiences a sense of pervading dread when this threat is not properly addressed by the authorities. This is a fear that the established order might collapse under the threat of the enemy. In the case of the Romanian denouncers, this established order is the new and fragile idea of civilized Europeanness, which is always threatened by the specter of returning state Communism with its totalitarian and corrupt ways. The “enemy” for these Romanian denouncers is vaguely defined but largely circumscribed to the unwanted and marginalized people. These people threaten the well-being of life in the city. Therefore, the denunciation is a combative act in a battle against people that are seen to threaten the established order and thus to not belong in it.

The practices of denunciation are typically made in the name of a set of values. The denouncer upholds these values and considers them to be shared also by the addressee of the denunciation. The act is made in the name of these values; to refrain from denouncing would mean to be an accomplice to the destruction of the established order by the “enemy”. The denouncer is thus explicitly enforcing the authority to which it addresses the act. To a great extent, the denouncers construct their identity on the axiological scaffolding upheld by the existing authority (Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1996: 763). As I will present below, in Romania this scaffold is composed of neoliberal middle class values, of which the most important one is civism. The Romanian denouncers use civism as the fundamental stake of their actions. They report people to the police in the name of a glorified idea of what a citizen’s duty is. The denunciation act illustrates the civic virtue of the citizen. At the apex of this virtue is the vigilance with which the citizen cares for public affairs (Lucas 1996: 774).

It is not only the denouncer that extracts legitimacy from upholding the values of the state, but also the other way around. In a democracy, the acts of denunciation that uphold the authority of the state depend on an intimate relationship with the police (Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1996: 760). As I will show in this text, this is also the case in Timișoara, Romania. The repressive acts of the police against marginal groups are performed and legitimized by denunciations. The police are constantly motivating its arrests, evictions, controls and harassing as being done following “reports from citizens”. In this, I diverge from the position held by Fitzpatrick and Gellately (1996: 761), who link the encouragement of denunciations by police to totalitarian states. In Timișoara, denunciations bear the mark of democratic acts that are performed in the name of getting rid of the totalitarian past. The civic virtue that guides denunciations is articulated as pertaining to a normalizing effort that intends to get rid of corruption and reinforce the rule of law. The mechanism of this effort will be outlined in the following section.

Neoliberalism in Romania

Romania is going through a phase of neoliberal economic and social policies. As capitalism is restructuring itself in the post-communist years, neoliberalism seemed to be the most natural solution to the 2008 financial and economic crisis. As head of the government, the Romanian president imposed the neoliberal solution in 2009. Subsequent governments have implemented it ever since (Vincze 2015). However, not all of these post-2009 governments successfully managed to reap the electoral benefits of the neo-liberal solution. The crisis management solutions had disastrous effects on parts of the population, and many Romanians became even more precarious and vulnerable than before (Vincze 2015: 127). Subsequently, there were some feeble attempts at lessening the impact of these measures. Mostly the so-called Social Democrat Party has taken these attempts.¹

As a reaction to this, the supporters of neo-liberalism reached out to the middle classes in order to rally them in what would become more than a political project. If neo-liberalism was to retain its legitimacy in Romania, it needed strong support from the educated, entrepreneurial, West-oriented and capitalist-friendly cognitariat. Neo-liberalism had to become an ethical project, concerned with the re-integration of the country in the civilized West. This project was constructed and articulated in an explicit tension with Romania’s communist past, represented by the so-called Social Democrats. The apex of this tension came in early 2017, when the demonized Social Democrats passed a controversial bill that sparked outrage in all political corners. Tens of thousands took to the streets, and soon the anti-corruption “Rezist” protests became the hallmark of the neo-liberal axiological and cultural project (Crimethinc.com 2017). At the heart of this project was the new middle class with its demands for upholding its values.

A civic and moral project: the new Romanian middle class

The Romanian middle class is an entity whose existence has long been denied by commentators and scholars. During the transition years the middle class was seen as an essential condition for the establishment of a stable market economy and a well-oiled capitalist system (Crăciun 2017: 4). A first wave of social agents that could be grouped under the label of middle class consisted of former communist cadres who managed to convert to entrepreneurial activities in the 1990s (Stoica 2004: 271). In subsequent years,

¹ It is worth mentioning that despite its name, the Social Democratic Party in Romania adheres almost full-heartedly to neoliberal politics (Ban 2016).

however, having a communist past began to be seen as a serious drawback for any managerial position (Simionca 2012: 143). This past began to be seen as an array of behaviors, mindsets, beliefs and attitudes that were in stark contradiction to the direction in which the country should go.

Therefore, a new middle class began to sprout, which as elsewhere in Eastern Europe became ideologically involved in building and supporting the neoliberal order (Buchovski 2008: 49). Presently, those who identify as belonging to the new Romanian middle class tend to do so relationally, in contrast, on the one hand, to an upper class characterized by privilege, excess and doubtful morality, and on the other hand (and primarily), with the lower class that is characterized by laziness, lack of education, failure and incapacity to adapt to society (Crăciun 2017: 7). Against all of these traits, the new middle class posits a programmatic aspiration towards doing things properly and more ethical than they have been done before. Romania is witnessing the rapid “empowering of the middle class, which uses the discourse of honesty and anti corruption [...] in order to take the low strata of society out of political fight” (Mitev 2017). Ethics becomes a crucial part of self-identification with the middle class.

Simultaneously, ethics places the middle class ethos within a “civic perspective”. As one analyst argues, “the middle class thinks of itself as the backbone of society, that chunk of society that carries Romania” (Monica Stroe, in Odobescu 2016). This civic perspective is able to generate a political project for the middle class, in which active interventions in public matters, street protests, petitions and publicly made demands become tools for disseminating its values. The apex of this came during the “Rezist” protests, when “middle class virtuousness, grounded in an ethics of personal responsibility, manifested not only through calls to civic engagement and support for technocratic anti-politics, but also through demands for moral and physical cleanliness” (Deoancă 2017: 3).

Fearing the Roma: moral panics

This “moral cleanliness” is a crucial stake of the denunciation mechanism. The Romanian middle class uses morality to claim its superiority and to defend its privileges. Romania is seen as a corrupt society that needs to be redeemed. The Communist past serves as the “Other” of the neoliberal present, and this otherness is constructed as “not only economically untenable but morally wrong” (Simionca 2012: 138). Thus, if the values of the Romanian middle class are to succeed in replacing the anachronistic “communist” ones, the latter need to be exposed on every occasion. Within such a perspective it is no wonder that the middle class in Romania endorses various moral panics ignited by the media and the police. The moral panic is a battle for the symbolic and social status dominance of one group over another (Garland 2008: 17). Complementary, moral panics serve the interest of the established powerful groups (Kramer 2010: 308).

More specifically, in Romania, the subject of moral panics is often the delinquency associated with Roma people (Vrăbiescu 2016: 204). The presence of Roma families in a neighborhood is often met with outrage, hostility and outright violence by non-Roma people (Raț 2013: 164). In the following sections, I will present other instances of moral panics in which Roma people (along with the refugees, poor and homeless) are vilified and exposed as enemies of the sought after moral order. Thus, what the middle class coins as a drive towards civility is in fact a concerted endeavor to enact oppression against the unwanted dwellers of the city. The state authorities and the media choose to “stoke the flames of moral panic about crime and

disorder” (Lipsitz 2016: 131) in order to win the consent and participation of the well-off classes for the established neoliberal political and economic project.

The criminalization of the poor and the Roma

The moral panic does not only generate a “climate of unease”, in which the state and its bureaucrats unintentionally create insecurity in order to advance their *habitus* interests (Bigo 2002). The creation of insecurity sits at the intersection of racial, economic and political projects. These projects have a programmatic character, as they are anchored in the neoliberal worldview. Under neoliberalism, poverty is not treated as a social problem but as a crime that can be ‘cured’ with repression and imprisonment. The neoliberal Romanian state is waging a war against poor people and the Roma, a war in which these marginal categories become security problems (Mireanu 2018: 122). As such, the policing of poverty has an overt economic and racial character. The Romanian state withdraws its social support for vulnerable groups and denies their rights as citizens, while at the same time it renders the homeless, the poor and the Roma as subaltern populations that can be surveyed, profiled and removed at will (Raț 2013: 156 – 7).

To this I add the active criminalization and penalization of these people by the state and the public. One of the fundamental traits of neoliberalism is “an expansive, intrusive and proactive penal apparatus” that serves to deepen inequalities and to reinforce the authority of the state, in the context of its retreat in other areas such as public services or welfare (Wacquant 2009: 307). The acts of denunciation provide an appendix to this apparatus, functioning hand in hand with the criminalization of poverty and fueling the moral panics through which the Romanian middle class establishes its symbolic and socio-political dominance. Complementary to the state’s action, the public support shown by the new middle class for projects such as urban renewal or increased securitization render the poor and the Roma “ideal subjects for moral panics” (Chelcea and Iancu 2015: 70).

The criminalization of poverty occurs simultaneously with gigantic gentrification processes in the large Romanian cities. As a consequence of these processes, the people who are socially and economically vulnerable are constantly being evicted from their homes, segregated and pushed to the margins (Vincze 2012; Mireanu 2018: 118 – 121). The main beneficiary of this gentrification is largely the middle class itself – the same class that preaches the discourse of the new civism.

Timișoara – the cradle of Romania’s civism

Timișoara is situated in the westernmost part of Romania, and it is the country’s third largest city, after Bucharest and Cluj. It is the place of several urban pioneer works, and it is also the place that sparked the anti-communist revolution of 1989. In post-socialist Romania, it enjoys the image of an exemplary city, whose dwellers have constantly proven their exceptional democratic qualities. Thanks to all of these, Timișoara is now seen as an example of multiculturalism and tolerance. To top it all, in 2016, the same year when Brâncovan started his campaign against the Roma thieves, Timișoara has been awarded the title of European Cultural Capital in 2021 (Popovici 2017).

However, Timișoara is not seen as a safe city, ranking only sixth in a hierarchy made by a national real estate company (Ciutacu 2018). As such, the local administration is undergoing a concerted effort to render the city’s streets safer and friendlier. In 2018 the mayor announced that all the homeless people have been

banished from the center of the city (Deaconescu 2018). Indeed, Timișoara is a city that prioritizes public security. Funded by the city administration, the Local Police has seen its budget constantly increased in the past years, and in 2017 the salaries of its employees had been “generously raised” (Codruț 2018). The Police has also acquired a number of vehicles for patrolling, Segways, and even a barge (more about this barge later). Consequently, in the summer of 2018 the mayor declared that Timișoara became one of the safest cities “in the world” (Galescu 2018).

Beyond this idealized imagery and its ritualistic reproduction in the collective mindset, the Timișoara police have constantly been pursuing a series of exclusionary practices (Copilaș 2013) that are legitimated by financial and political interests (H.arta 2015). Timișoara is undergoing a rampant process of gentrification, during which capital develops not only built infrastructure, but also an economic and political class of city dwellers with priorities that go beyond having high incomes. The winners of gentrification in Timișoara desire status, prestige and appreciation, while at the same time seek values such as public cleanliness, safety on the streets and in parks. While these might be considered standard needs and values for the citizens of any democratic city, they do not sit very comfortable with any idea of urban solidarity or with the idea that the city belongs to everyone who is using it (H.arta 2017).

Timișoara is the cradle of Romania’s new civism, with a strong militant dimension that is aimed particularly at Roma people, precarious people and generally at any marginalized group. In the beginning of the 2010s a yearly “march against Gypsy real estate mafia” was drawing attention to the degradation of “historical” buildings in the downtown area by groups of Roma people living in them. This march was organized by two local far-right groups (Totok 2013). Less politically explicit but similarly active, one association for the preservation of Timișoara’s heritage wages the same war against Roma groups (“clans”) that acquire old buildings in the city. Over the years this association sent numerous denunciations to the police, complaining that Roma people living in old buildings are “destroying historical monuments” (Asociația Culturală Salvați Patrimoniul Timișoarei 2016). This fetishisation of old houses is a trademark of the Romanian middle-class, which is rediscovering and reclaiming the city centers, after they had been left to decay during the Socialist era (Mireanu 2018: 120; Petrovici N. 2012: 2388 – 90). In Timișoara specifically, this trend intersects with the prevalent anti-Roma sentiments. This is due to a number of nationalized villas in the city center that have been bought by wealthy Roma “clans” (Dawidson 2004: 138; 147), and that have led to Timișoara becoming notorious for having its center ‘stolen’ by Gypsies (Mit 2017). Reclaiming this center and the “historical buildings” thus becomes a matter of reclaiming the city and its civilizational ethos for the middle class.

The “thieves hunter”

The actions of Cristi Brâncovan are situated within the genealogy of civism outlined in the previous section. He is closely related to the supporters’ group of the Timișoara football team, a group he also occasionally led (Petrovici, G. 2016). Even before his campaign against pocket thieves, Brâncovan was a “strong voice of the local civil society” (Oancia 2017). It is worth mentioning that the supporters of the local football team have been closely associated with far-right groups.

Thanks to his Facebook campaign started in early 2016 he quickly found thousands of followers in his anti-crime crusade. On his own page he started to publish photos and videos with pocket thieves. This media collection contains the faces of various people suspected or condemned for petty theft (Dancea 2016a). In

what is a proper exhibition of denunciations, Brâncovan publicized the full name, address and criminal record for each of these people (Petrovici, G., 2016). As I have shown elsewhere, in the case of marginalized people, the right to privacy and the presumption of innocence can be easily violated if there is the slightest suspicion concerning them (Gkresta and Mireanu 2016: 234). The recorded and published images serve to visually illustrate delinquency and disorder, and to convert suspicion to conviction. The role of images is to evoke emotions, and in this case, Brâncovan's gallery sparked anger and panic among the people of Timișoara.

The people whose photos are published in Brâncovan's gallery seem all to have Roma origins.² Brâncovan has constantly denied the racist nature of his campaign, and he was always cautious not to come off as being racist (Șchiopu 2017). However, I consider that publishing the images of these people contributes significantly to the already rampant racism present in Timișoara and Romania. A clue to this can be found in the comments below each photo, which Brâncovan does not disprove, and which range from calls for mass murders to evoking interwar Romanian Fascist figures such as Marshall Antonescu or Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. The comments explicitly link Roma people to the pocket thefts, and call for their castigation (or murder) in most severe manners. Moreover, the same racism can be found in the ways in which the local press refers to the "Roma clans" that have allegedly been exposed by Brâncovan (Bănățenii.ro 2017). Brâncovan may avoid being explicitly racist, but he never declined any racist interpretations of his actions.

Brâncovan is often accompanied by a group of friends that are also part of the football supporters' group. In a TV news piece that features some pickpockets threatening him with violence in response to his actions, he claims that he is not afraid for himself, that behind him are several other people, and that each time he went for "street actions" he was not alone (Antena1 2017). During his first action, he was accompanied by a "patrol" that also "checked the trams for thieves" (Codruț 2016). Concerning this patrol, Brâncovan declared that "there are people who support me, because the thieves can often become aggressive. I am convinced that the thieves are armed with knives, and so my fellows are only there to protect me" (Oancia 2017). In the winter of 2016 Brâncovan and his group of protectors filmed themselves hitting a man and a woman in a bus stop because they were on his list of suspects (Antena1 2016).

The right hand of the state

Brâncovan's actions are fueled by his and others' perception of the state's incapacity to handle the situation created by the pickpockets. From this discursive starting point, Brâncovan and the other denouncers from Timișoara build an entire narrative about the corruption of the state as being the main cause of the climate of unease in which the thieves operate (OpiniaTimișoarei.ro 2017a). In the spring of 2016, Brâncovan held a speech with a megaphone in front of the Timișoara Police headquarters, during which he requested the law enforcers to pay less attention to "obscure interests" and to solve the theft problem (Zorfie 2016a). One year later, during the "Rezist" anti-corruption protests in Timișoara, Brâncovan was among the main organizers and speakers. He was also one of the most vocal critics of the amnesty law that sparked the protests, and he explicitly articulated the connection between pocket thieves and the "Parliament thieves" (Banatulazi.ro 2017).

² See also Zorfie, 2016b.

However, Brâncovan cooperates closely with the authorities and his actions reinforce the state's repression against marginal groups. In the beginning of his campaign, he repeatedly admitted that people working in the police deliver him a good deal of the information he publishes on his suspects (Dancea 2016b). Moreover, as I will show in the next section, the police have not been entirely reluctant to intervene against the thieves, as he was initially lamenting. In the first months of his campaign, the police evicted a family that had been living in an abandoned building at the outskirts of the city (Toma 2016). Brâncovan had been acquainted with the family since December 2015, when he posted a video in which he was accusing the children of mugging his wife (Marta 2015). In another video, Brâncovan and his masked patrol are seen harassing three people in a bus, and accusing them of being pickpockets. These people are bullied, taken off the bus and handed over to the police. The authorities do not seem at any point to question the actions of the masked vigilantes (Brâncovan 2016). As a matter of fact, neither Brâncovan nor his accomplices have ever been penalized in any way for their acts of harassment, assault and violence.

In the two years since the beginning of his campaign, the only state authority that criticized Brâncovan was Timișoara's mayor, Nicolae Robu (OpiniaTimișoarei.ro 2018). Otherwise, there seems to be a generalized consensus in the media and in the public opinion that the actions of this man are legitimate and honored. In fact, the local and national press is unanimously using pompous labels that at times reach ridiculous hyperbolic levels. Cristi Brâncovan is "the dread of pickpockets" (OpiniaTimișoarei.ro 2017a), "Romania's vigilante" (Observator.tv 2017) and a "super hero of Timișoara's streets" (Click.ro 2016). His acts of denunciation, exposure, intimidation and occasional violence are seen as a laudable instance of civic attitude, typical for Timișoara's civilized mindset (Toma 2017).

Eventually, even the mayor began to approve his actions. At the end of 2017, the city hall announced that it would evict a Roma family from a social home in a "historic neighborhood" of Timișoara (Deaconescu 2017b). Several members of this family have been denounced by Brâncovan as being pickpockets. He had previously blamed the mayor for not evicting the thieves from the social houses. As a reply, the cunning mayor invoked the danger of coming off as a racist, deeming that a cultural capital such as Timișoara cannot take discriminatory measures against ethnic minorities. The mayor also stated that in principle he agrees with Brâncovan's claim that the Roma people making a living out of theft should not benefit from social housing; however, as a mayor, he is bound to the law.³

Dirty homeless, Roma thieves and aggressive refugees: denunciations in police reports

Apart from Brâncovan, there are countless other less famous denouncers. They are anonymous citizens that decide to notify the police about things they find annoying and disturbing, things usually related to homeless, refugees and Roma people. As a consequence, there is an overwhelming number of repressive acts by the Police – evictions, displacements, arrests and removals – that come as a result of citizens' denunciations. These denunciations are visible through the press statements of the Timișoara Local Police.

There is a close cooperation between the citizens of Timișoara and the Police aiming at suppressing the undesirable social groups from the city. Since 2016 the Local Timișoara Police has been leading a public campaign for drumming up denunciation from the citizens. Along with various info materials posted in public transportation, the Police also conducted visits in the city's neighborhoods. These visits were intended to

³ The entire conversation is reproduced in OpiniaTimișoarei.ro 2017b.

establish “relationships” with the citizens, in order to detect the problems that these are facing (TLP⁴ 2016d). In the press releases, the Police have constantly urged citizens to support its actions. Thus, in 2016 the Police asked the people of Timișoara “not to give money to beggars, because otherwise they would continue to live on the streets” (TLP 2016a). In the same period, as the pickpockets “phenomenon” was still the fashionable urban panic in Timișoara, the Police was requesting the victims and witnesses “not to let themselves be intimidated and to take attitude by supporting the arrests of suspects, when these try to escape the Police” (TLP 2016c). In 2017, the Police were targeting street vendors, who are usually also homeless people that illegally sell any kind of valuable object they can find in the dumpsters. The authorities petitioned the citizens to “not buy such products nor to support this type of commercial activities” (TLP 2017b).

All these calls for castigation did not fall on deaf ears, and the good citizens of Timișoara rushed to alert the Police about various crimes. These denunciations had three major themes. The first theme revolved around the image deficit that the “dirty” homeless people bring to the city. Towards the end of 2016, the authorities started to arrest the homeless people living in one of the main marketplaces of the city center. Here, as the Police announced, “there have been over time, countless complaints from citizens concerned with the unaesthetic and unkempt appearances, with the presence of homeless people, and with the fact that all this jeopardizes the image of our city” (TLP 2016b). The “filth” left over by the homeless generates “discomfort”, a thing that many citizens lament (TLP 2017c). The same state of discomfort is also caused by the homeless people living in the downtown area, who “beg and consume alcohol” (TLP 2017d), or those from the central park who “sleep in the green areas, go out during the day in order to beg and to create discomfort for the passers-by” (TLP 2017f).

The police have promptly intervened in order to “clear out” the beggars’ “dens” and to irremediably “eradicate” this “phenomenon” (TLP 2017f). The people of Timișoara are bothered by the living images of poverty and irritated by the constant pleas of the beggars. At the same time, it is worth noticing that the downtown of Timișoara is currently being heavily gentrified. The marketplace and the park where the police was summoned to intervene are in the close vicinity of the new buildings of the Business Center. Opened in 2014 on the ruins of a former factory in the downtown of Timișoara, the City Business Center is a “premium quality office complex” of 43000 square meters. Nepi Rockcastle, the same company that owns other business estates throughout Romania, such as shopping malls in Bucharest and Sibiu, finances it.⁵

The second theme of the denunciations in Timișoara relates to the crimes committed by homeless people. As shown in the previous section, Brâncovan’s campaign struck Timișoara with the panic of petty theft in public transportation. At the behest of this panic more and more people started to denounce thefts in public transport and to pressure the authorities to stop this phenomenon. As the Police was initially slow to react, things degenerated towards a true urban hysteria, in which the pickpockets became one of the main problems of the city (Tîrcă 2016). Finally, in May 2017, the Police initiated a “vast action” in trams and trolleybuses, which resulted in 25 fines for acts of social misbehavior. There were no charges with theft against the people who were denounced, as the Police could not find any evidence against them (TLP 2017e). Still, the Police continued to perform these actions systematically, “counting on and asking for the support of the population in validating illegal actions” (TLP 2017e).

⁴ I use TLP as an abbreviation for Timișoara Local Police.

⁵ See also <http://www.business-centre.ro/community.html>

The third theme of the denunciations made by Timișoara people is connected to refugees. Some of these people took shelter in the city or were forcefully detained in the so-called Transit Center at the outskirts of the city. The presence of foreigners who were associated in the public imaginary with terrorism and war soon gave way to panic. In the beginning of 2016, some citizens of Timișoara notified the Police about a group of “extremely aggressive immigrants” that were strolling around the city center. The publicity around this sparked a series of anti-refugee feelings among Timișoara dwellers (Țintă 2016). The “aggressive group” was however living in a prison-like regime in the Transit Center, and would therefore not be allowed out on the streets again; for one more year the city could sleep in peace, assured that among the visiting foreigners there were no Islam warriors.

In the summer of 2017, the Local Police spent almost €30000 for buying a barge with which they could patrol the Bega Canal (Deaconescu 2017a). The “results” began to appear shortly after this: in June 2017, the law enforcement on the boat noticed a group of people that were hiding under a bridge. These people were refugees from Iran and the Kurdish part of Iraq (TLP 2017h).

The panic associated by refugees was fueled by another “hero” in the style of Brâncovan. In September 2017, one concerned citizen named Ștefan Cojocnean alerted the authorities regarding a group of 15 Iraqi citizens that were hiding in a central park (Jurchela 2017). Cojocnean created a reputation for himself as being “more efficient than the secret services” in finding illegalized refugees (Ziuadevest.ro 2017). In the words of a local journalist, “he has no rest, he sees and gets alarmed, and like a good Timișoara citizen, he calls the Police and the Police calls the Secret Services” (Epure 2017). Soon after, other uneasy citizens took his example and started to hunt for groups of refugees. In October 2017, the Police arrested 11 refugees who had been denounced by the Timișoara people for setting up tents on a field outside the city (TLP 2017i).

Evictions as a consequence of denunciations

Denunciations can have dramatic effects on homeless and poor people. The Timișoara Local Police operated a number of evictions that followed citizens’ complaints. In doing so, the police are justifying its violent actions through the direct support they get from the population. In March 2017, as a result of such a complaint, 4 adults and 7 children were evicted from “a hut next to which they gathered a significant quantity of garbage” (TLP 2017a). One month later, other seven minors and 5 adults were evicted. They were part of a group of nomads who squatted an empty plot of land. The Police press release mentions that the eviction came as a result of “citizens lamenting the discomfort and dirt caused by people living in tents and improvised huts” (TLP 2017c). In June 2017, “one citizen noticed the existence of a nomadic camp on an empty plot”, and as a consequence of this denounce, six people were evicted and fined (TLP 2017g).

Since the beginning of 2018, although it is illegal to evict during winter time, the Local Police of Timișoara organized three evictions at the behest of citizens’ denunciations. In 10 January, 8 people were evicted from a building where “there were complaints that homeless people hide” (TLP 2018a). Few days later, other 17 people, of whom 10 were underage, were evicted from improvised huts built on a land where “there were notifications that homeless people have built shelters” (TLP 2018b). Finally, on the 30th of January, the Police announced two other evictions: one was of two people who were “spotted by citizens while they were improvising huts”, and one was of eight people who were denounced for taking shelter in a warehouse where they were “making a mess” (TLP 2018c). In all these cases, the denunciations regarded not only the

presence of homeless people, but also the dirt that these were producing, which was obviously causing distress to the good citizens of the European Cultural Capital.

Conclusion

The denunciations made by Timișoara citizens against pocket thieves, against homeless people and beggars and against illegalized refugees do not come from an innocent position of people concerned only with the good functioning of the city. The denouncer is not a disinterested person, without any political or racist preferences – as Brâncovan so tirelessly claims he is. There is no public engagement that can be politically or ideologically neutral. Brâncovan runs his own business in Timișoara, of which close to nothing is revealed publicly (Petrovici, G. 2016). Stefan Cojocnean owns a sports gym in the center of the city and an online cosmetics shop. These denouncers speak from a position of privilege – class, ethnicity and education. From such positions, regardless how innocent or laudable their actions might seem, they have very clearly biased and politically engaged effects.

The phenomenon of denunciation is not an exceptional instance, but a symptom of an ideological transformation, during which the Romanian middle class forges an alliance with the state and reclaims its own definitions and practices of justice. This is a justice that does not belong to everyone – just like the city and its public spaces do not belong to everyone. Citizenship becomes a privilege and a premium for those that embody and perform the already established civic values: work, private property ownership, stable income, civilization, entrepreneurship and also ethnic and racial “healthy” origins (Vincze 2015: 138; 149).

Denouncers are not heroes, and their deeds do not contribute to a safer city for everyone. It is thus crucial that we see beyond the veil of civism and recognize denunciation and the collaboration with the police against marginal groups as part of a battle for the hegemony of the discursive, ideological and social space. This battle is itself part of the neoliberal vision of how “civilized Romania” should look like in 2018. The acts of denunciation are mechanisms through which on the one hand, those that feel they belong to the middle class enact their part in this battle, through an ethic of civism; and on the other hand the authorities are legitimizing their repressive actions performed in the name of security.

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