

Student collective action in support of Palestine: a case study at the University of Bucharest

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Abstract: This paper highlights how Romanian students mobilized to present claims related to the consequences of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Using the interview and other qualitative research methods, I analyze how the group which organized an encampment at the University of Bucharest perceives the national environment of student organizations, as well as the way in which they are connected internationally

At the same time, I discuss the organizational particularities of a student encampment, focusing on the administrative-logistical aspects, including how to attract the participants, without ignoring the difficulties they have as students in passing on their information to the press and to other interested actors. For these purposes, I use a theoretical perspective that contrasts modes of student organization of the corporatist and the social movement types.

Apart from the interviews with representatives of this solidarity movement, an important data source was represented by the conversations on the (open) Telegram channel between the organizers and the participants in the encampment. Using this information, I explore reasons for choosing the current form of protest, for the formulation of certain types of claims, and why the University is seen as the primary target of such claims.

Last but not least, the study analyzes if such collective action influences the perception of groups in the university community regarding students rallying for ideologies and international movements in support of the rights of other communities in conflict zones, or marginalized or otherwise oppressed.

Key words: students, movements, Palestine, encampment, university, protests, collective action

JEL: D71; D73; D74, D85, I21, I23. [Click her for JEL classification](#)

1. Introduction

With the outbreak of the new armed conflict between Israel and Palestine, global attention has moved to the victims of this war. Throughout 2024, in several universities in the United States and in Europe various social groups have engaged in collective action aimed at the cause of the Palestinians victims. One of the segments of civil society that stood out in organizing support movements for this community were the students.

As Altbach (2006, p. 330) says, the university is a particularly favorable environment for the development of organizations and movements among students. Several groups have decided, in various European and American universities, to show their support for the Palestinian cause frequently through occupy actions – in these cases, occupying an area of the university campus to draw attention to a set of demands.

This type of movement also took shape in Romania, where, starting on May 20, 2024, a group of students set up their tents on the campus of the University of Bucharest (UB) and began to formulate demands regarding the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The protest continued for five weeks, during which there were a few rounds of negotiations with university representatives, which did not, however, meet the expectations of the protesters. The number of participants varied throughout this period, from a few people to more than 50 during the organization of specific events within the campus.

The context for the emergence of this protest, in tandem with a second one in another major academic center, Cluj, is worth highlighting briefly. Over the last few years, student protests have been virtually absent in Romania, despite a strong tradition of protesting in the 1990s. But in the meantime student representative organizations have opted for other means of influencing the media agenda or the decision-makers, very much in agreement with Altbach's (2006, p. 336) statement that student movements are almost always sporadic—they seldom last for a long period of time. Another particularity of these events is that the participating students are not part of the formal framework of student representative organizations, nor members or leaders of student organizations. This too makes the UB encampment worth exploring.

2. Literature review

Luescher-Mamashela (2015, p. 37) claimed that “the term student politics is perhaps best used as an umbrella concept to refer to all kinds of political activities of students, whether formal or informal, ordinary or extraordinary, or oriented towards society or academia”. Klemencic (2018, p. 2-3) proposes a difference between student representation and activism. Representation assumes the existence of formal (or institutionalized) channels through which students try to influence decisions, while “activism engages in claim-makings outside of formal decision structures” and “has been associated with contentious politics and non-institutionalized forms of claim-making, such as protests, boycotts, campaigns”.

Theocharis (2011, p. 206) suggests that, while traditional political participation is in decline, there has been an increase in extra-institutional forms of participation. This applies to the type of student political participation explored in this article. Luescher (2018, p. 308) says that “student

organizations and student movements are the typical platforms from which student activism is collectively organized”, even though there are protests and collective actions that are not conducted by formal representative organizations, as is the case here. Pakulski (1991, xiv) defines social movements as “recurrent patterns of collective activities which are partially institutionalized, value oriented and anti-systemic in their form and symbolism”. In the case examined here, the institutional dimension is nearly absent or it is created through the community meetings of the students group. The participants at the encampment are outside the institutionalized system of student representation. As Rucht (2016, p. 26) states, groups such as the one under study may develop and use specific protest techniques, slogans, and habits that distinguish it from other protesters.

Buheji & Hasan (2024, p. 59) also reinforce the point that university campuses are often spaces of political activism and places for debating ideas, providing an environment where students are exposed to new perspectives. This context can challenge previously held beliefs and encourage participation in movements, such as those supporting Palestinian rights. The same authors stated that, for students, encampments represent a liberated zone from Zionist influence or genocide. This type of encampment involves setting up tents or temporary structures on university grounds. Their role as a central hub for the protest is to provide a space for students to meet, discuss, and share information about the Palestinian cause with other students and other interested people. Additionally, the choice of an encampment is symbolic, mirroring the conditions of displacement faced by many Palestinians (Buheji & Hasan, 2024, p. 61).

Castells (2012) identified a couple of common characteristics of contemporary social movements (apud Culum and Doolan, 2015). The collective actions „are at the same time local and global, networked in multiple forms, leaderless and non-violent”. Social media „helps maintain the potential for protest even at a time when social mobilization is generally weak” (F. Lee et al., 2020).

Habermas (1989, p.14) mentioned that students can definitely understand themselves as the future elite of the nation, responsible for a large-scale modernization process, which is the case of students that participated in the action examined here. They believe that is their role to expand the perspective about Palestinian victims and to change beliefs in their society.

3. Research methodology

In order to obtain information about the organization of University of Bucharest encampment in support of the Palestinian cause, I used qualitative content analysis of the messages published on different social media networks where the protesting students have communicated (Telegram, Instagram) and I conducted a structured interview.

Taking into account that Altbach (2006, p. 332) mentioned that student public communications are among the most visible elements of student organizational culture, I also analyzed messages sent by students protesters using two social media networks (Telegram and Instagram) from May 13 to June 28, 2024. I decided to start one week before the first day of the encampment and to stop at the announcement of its suspension.

The structured interview was conducted on the basis of an interview guide, organized on five main themes - the organization of collective action, the demands, the relationship with the international student movement, the relationship with student organizations in Romania, and the ideology of the protest.

The research objectives of this article are: to identify the organizational particularities of a student encampment (O1); to highlight how the demands of a new, contextually emerged collective movement are established (O2); and to describe how student organizations and representative students interacted with the protest participants (O3).

4. Results and discussions

Regarding the organization of the protest, the students did not all know each other when the protest started. Coupled with a considerable level of distrust regarding the university and even in themselves, this made them unable to establish a clear list of demands from the beginning. As Klemencic (2015, p.17) mentioned, students often engage in activities without having in mind definite desired outcomes or without being able to fully foresee all of the possible consequences of their action.

According to della Porta (2005) and Klemencic (2014), students have multiple networks they belong to and different identities in relation to these social groups. In our case, they created specific codes and gestures to show their agreement or disagreement with the ideas and issues before them. For example, decisions were made by majority vote in regular meetings and there was no leader, so reaction times were longer and the influence of democratic decision-making was very visible. In the encampment, students assumed clearly defined roles, like being part of teams responsible for communication on social media or information in the legislative field.

The choice of the place of protest – a small lawn with a few trees in one of the UB campuses – was not accidental. During the interview, it was reported that being in the courtyard of the University's main administrative building and the rector's office (the main actor targeted by the protest) made students feel safer. Apart from one politician who wanted to capitalize electorally on the encampment, there were no incidents in the first 3 weeks of the mobilization.

The demands of the movement were a topic of constant discussion both in various social circles and among the participants in the protest. Firstly, they had a series of demands including the University's breaking off any partnerships with Israel, transparency concerning the University's links to Israeli entities, and UB taking a public institutional position on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Later, the claims went through a process of adjustment, according to the organizers, to render them clearer and more concise. This lack of clarity may also be due to the fact that many of the participants did not seem to understand well the decision-making mechanisms in a university.

A clear difference may be observed between the two sets of demands. The revised version included several requests regarding the rights of students in protest contexts, including their access to drinking water and electricity during the protest, highlighting a dimension that Altbach (2006) and Luescher Mamashela (2015) considered important: the ways in which higher education in general provides enabling conditions for student activism. Some demands were also

related to the procedure of the negotiations - protesters wanted all demands to be discussed in one meeting and voted on individually, not as an entire set.

Predictably, this mobilization had a visible international component. Most of the slogans used were adapted or taken from similar actions in the United States or Western Europe. There is a permanent communication between students all over the world (not necessarily centralized or coordinated) regarding the Palestinian cause. Buheji & Hasan, (2024, p. 71) also pointed out that the slogans are created to express solidarity and to communicate key messages to the world about students' demands.

Students at the encampment did not feel represented by student organizations from the UB or nationally. This type of collective action provides a good context to highlight specific social and political views or perspectives, especially of the progressive type, reinforcing Altbach's (2006, p.335) contention that most contemporary student movements are on the left in terms of ideology and politics. Even if more established student organizations in Romania did not show solidarity with the cause of the protesters, activists believed that they had an important role in the landscape of university representation and must be as present as possible in student life. As Klemencic (2007) and Popovic (2015) mention, the trust between students and their representatives has been decreasing and the challenges are today more diverse and complex.

In terms of student engagement, there are a few observations worth discussing. Although established student organizations have not taken a position on the issue, there are members of the latter who support the cause personally and are actively involved without a public commitment. This highlights Altbach's (2006, p. 332) point that student organizations have a major influence on campus culture and ethos.

At the same time, there was some participation of foreign students, the majority of them coming through formal academic exchanges. This reinforces the importance of the almost universal use of the English language. However, as protesters revealed in the interview, some students from the Arab world or from the Palestinian territories fear that they could suffer repercussions if they participate in the protests.

As Gozman-Concha (2017) observes, in the case of occupy movements, the organizers must provide participants with a series of activities and meetings that have a dual purpose: to attract more participants and to provide those who participate with ways of occupying "free" time. As in the international encampments, Romanian students organized panel discussions and other events that shed light on the historical and current context of the Gaza conflict. As mentioned in Telegram, they had one or two workshops or activities every day and they made new banners with participants' help. Students also knew that social media campaigns can go viral, so they posted daily on Instagram and on the dedicated Telegram channel. One of the Telegram messages stated that „we made it into the news BIG TIME! No one can ignore our action! We are seen and we are heard”

The passage of time is considered disadvantageous to movements, given that protest participants in time grow tired. In Bucharest, the temperatures rose noticeably over the period of the encampment, and the number of students visiting the campus decreased due to the approaching final examinations and of the university holidays.

In contrast to the US case, where many students faced disciplinary actions, including warnings, probation, suspension, or even expulsion for their involvement in the protests (Buheji & Hasan, 2024, p. 68), Romanian students did not receive any sanctions from the University.

5. Conclusions

This article highlights the particularities of organizing a student encampment without the support of previously established organizations or groups, highlighting protesters' relationship with the local, national or international student movement.

This event may illuminate how the University of Bucharest is willing or prepared to respond to such requests not only in this case, but also more generally. It may also shed light on how this and similar events influence the discussion about student rights in a global and local context under difficult circumstances.

Last but not least, these events question the role of the university as a social actor that can have public positions on issues outside the academic environment. At the same time, the perspective of the collective mobilization of students outside the formal framework of representation could be explored for further findings.

This short study can be expanded by identifying the factors that contribute to student solidarity with causes they are not directly and immediately affected by, or by discussing the similarities and differences between similar protest movements for the Palestinian cause in Cluj-Napoca or around the world.

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