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# **Don't Steal Our Right to Vote! A Comparative Analysis of the Electoral Protests in Romania and Moldova**

Diana MARGARIT<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

When democratic norms and principles are challenged by fraud and abuse, the role of electoral protests usually consists in expressing the civil discontent, reprimanding political authorities and nevertheless re-enacting the confidence into the democratic order. The most recent electoral uprisings from Romania in 2014 and Moldova in 2016 during the presidential elections made no exception. By using theoretical opportunity structure framework, this article seeks to provide a comparative analysis of these two episodes by focusing on the following aspects: a) the civil society's reaction to the tensioned political environment; b) the deficient organization of the elections and the accusations of fraud as incentives for the social mobilization both domestically and abroad, namely by the diaspora.

Keywords: electoral protests, Romania, Moldova, fraud, diaspora.

## **Introduction**

During the past few years, citizens from different parts of the world have been largely expressing their rage and discontent towards governments, corporations, different political agents whose decisions were being considered unjust. Corruption, austerity policies, oligarchic governments, lack of representation and transparency or fraud have been some of the incentives for social mobilization in the most recent antigovernmental protests. In this respect, Romania and Moldova's recent uprisings made no exception. These two Eastern neighbouring countries shared a common history during the first half of the twentieth century and later on, a totalitarian past dominated by the socialist ideology and political structures. After the fall of communism, the Moldovan society was torn apart between the Russian and European political influences, dominated by tensions manifested during the electoral processes opposing on one side, the pro-Eastern factions, and the Western democratic ones, on the other side. Despite many discrepancies between Romania

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and Moldova in terms of both domestic and foreign policy, the recent evolution of the civil society activism, the mobilization of the homeland population and diaspora and the structure of the protesters' claims are nevertheless similar. This paper points out one such framework of similarities, depicted during their most recent electoral protests.

Throughout the past six years, Romanian public space faced intense episodes of antigovernmental uprisings and turmoil which culminated with the protests from February 2017. Starting with January 2012, the public rage turned against the deficiencies in the health system as well as the political austerity measures of the democratic liberal government. The riots partially politicized due to the implication of the Social-Liberal Union (SLU) - formed by the Social-Democrat Party (SDP) and the National Liberal Party (NLP), back then in opposition, lasted until the Prime Minister, Emil Boc - member of the Democratic Liberal Party (DLP) and ex-colleague of party to the President Traian Basescu - was forced to resign (Pidd, 2012). If 2012 was dominated by rather diverse but small protests, the following year witnessed a wave of environmental protests known as the Romanian Autumn that started on 1 September 2013 and lasted until 11 February 2014. The environmental movement formerly concentrated on the protection of two villages, Rosia Montana and Pungesti, threatened by the use of gold mining cyanides and fracking (Besliu, 2013; Euronews, 2013a) but soon, it turned into antigovernmental street actions that criticized the high-level corruption and the complicity between domestic political authorities and the global corporate actors like Chevron and Gabriel Resources.

During the past years, Romania's Eastern neighbouring country, Moldova, has been dominated by political and civil tensions between pro-Russian and pro-European groups once the European market opened for the Moldovan products (De Jong, Abdalla & Imanalieva, 2017). Moreover, in spite of a reserved political culture to the manifestation of civil society, antigovernmental protests became more and more visible (BTI, 2016). In April 2009, it witnessed the first significant contentious episode since its independence, when thousands of people took the streets of Chisinau and other cities during the parliamentary elections. Before the announcement of the results, they claimed that the ruling Party of Communists committed fraud and thus, demanded new elections. Protesters, mostly youngsters, used Twitter (Barry, 2009) as social channel to mobilize and plan their strategic actions (BBC, 2009; Zawadzki, 2009). At the same time, international monitors failed to observe the elections because of the reluctance of the government to create necessary conditions for an appropriate monitoring activity.

The unrest turned soon into riot due to violent clashes between protesters and police. As a result, hundreds of participants were arrested and tortured in prisons (Amnesty International, 2017; Escritt, 2009). President Voronin, member of the winning party, called the events 'coup d'état' and accused Romania of being the master-mind behind the events (Southeast European Times, 2009). From the point of view of the administration, the diplomatic crisis between Moldova and

Romania following these accusations had been mainly caused by the protesters from Chisinau who not only expressed their anti-communist claims, but also demanded unification with Romania. In this context, it is not difficult to understand why the communist and pro-Russian president considered Romania as a fearful enemy and a saboteur of its sovereignty. The same year, the Alliance for European Integration, a pro-European coalition, won the parliamentary elections, but in 2013 it fell apart and so did the expectations of the society on the democratization of the state. On November 3, the pro-Europe manifestations organized by the Liberal Democratic Party, the Democratic Party and the Liberal Reformist Party gathered more than one hundred thousand people on the streets of the capital city (Euronews, 2013b). Later on, in 2015 the grassroots movement Dignity and Truth organized massive rallies in Chisinau, following the news announcing the disappearance of one billion dollars from the Moldovan banks a year before (Brett, Knott & Popsoi, 2015; Demytrie, 2015). From the protesters' point of view, because the political parties were corrupted and focused exclusively on oligarchic interests, they demanded once again the resignation of the (pro-European) government (Delcour, 2017: 31).

This paper focuses on the two electoral protests that occurred in November 2014, in Romania, respectively, two years later, in Moldova, during the presidential elections. In both cases, protesters accused government of fraud and violation of the right to vote. Thus, election itself became a source of blame (Tucker, 2007) due to the fact that people's claims focused rather on the legality and the rightness of the process itself than on its consequences, even though the later had undoubtedly a considerable influence. The aim of this paper consists in highlighting the fact that both the Romanian and Moldovan electoral protests were based on the use of similar ingredients: the dissatisfaction of the civil society with the performances of political authorities, electoral fraud and the mobilization of diaspora during the antigovernmental uprisings. As a matter of fact, diaspora played a decisive role in the mobilization and the progress of the uprisings, especially in the context in which almost 20% of Romania and Moldova's population was already forced to immigrate based on economic grounds (Banca de date statistice Moldova, 2016; United Nations, 2015).

The political opportunity theory provides a suitable framework for understanding in a comparative manner the political environment and the culture protest that led to the deployment of the antigovernmental social anger in the streets of both countries in many similar ways, starting from its causes and ending with its manifestation. The paper is organised as follows: the first section reviews the literature and the second one provides a comparative analysis of the electoral protests in Romania in 2014 and Moldova in 2016. The comparison provides an investigation of the domestic structural opportunities, the role of fraud in the election process and the place of diaspora in the evolution of protests.

## Theoretical framework

Protests are the expression of civil mobilization, the citizens' direct or indirect reaction to social and political conditions (Meyer, 2004; Meyer, 1993). By being torn between several levels of support, citizens act according to regime principles they highly appreciate, but repudiate regime performances, institutions and political actors (Norris, 1999: 10). If people believe that their collective voice can exert pressure on political actors and thus make a difference, then they will most certainly act (Opp, Voss & Gern, 1995). Their demands, the homogeneity of their diagnostics and previsions, the intensity of the activists' involvement within the movement, the density of the mobilization networks, and the continuity of their actions (Della Porta, 2009) bear witness of the way they evaluate the political environment as such. At the same time, their goals consist in exerting pressure on political elites (Offe, 1985) and determining changes according to their wills and interests. Thus, public space becomes the arena where ordinary citizens, through solidarity and common understanding of their problems confront authorities, elites, and opponents (Tarrow, 2011: 8; Jenkins & Form, 2005; Tilly, 2004: 12-14) or, differently put, targets (Opp, 2009). Individuals agree to act together because the costs of acting individually are higher than those of acting collectively. They use protests as primary tools to express discontent towards injustice and/or illegality, and to raise awareness on those solutions necessary to reform or repudiate political decisions (Turner, 1969: 817).

Protests usually occur in certain conditions depending on the stability of the relations between civil groups and political actors, the tendency of the political authorities to repress contentious collective manifestations, the ability of civil society to influence the decision-making agenda, the popular backlash of the issue raised by the civil groups, the gap between elites and marginalized groups, alliances and cleavage structures, and the strategies of the challengers (McAdam, 2004; Marks & McAdam, 1999; McAdam, 1996; Kriesi, 2005; Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak & Giugni, 1995; Kriesi Koopmans, Duyvendak & Giugni, 1992). These elements create the opportunity framework for social movements to coagulate and express demands. In this respect, the configuration of the political scene can generate opportunities for social mobilization and collective action (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004).

Protests express the social perception on political system and decisions, their weaknesses and challenges and the direct or indirect response to them (Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010). Among them, electoral protests have a high impact on the political scene because their aims consist in strategically constraining the opposition or the incumbents to formulate responses in the name of democratic elections (Beaulieu, 2014). They usually are a source of democratization or an appeal to the revival of democratic practices and norms in illiberal contexts (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Protests can decisively influence policymaking by overturning political options and perspectives in favour of the movement and the

social dynamics involved in the contentious process finally shape the political spectrum in a consistent manner (Madestam, Shoag, Veuger & Yanagizawa-Drott, 2013). The pre-election violent reactions of the political authorities are more likely to generate post-election manifestations as well in order to maintain the power in the same political hands. Thus, violence is the response to the threat coming from opposition, unpopular perception of the society and weak institutionalized pressure (Hafner-Burton, Hyde & Jablonski, 2014). Furthermore, post-election protests are even more virulent when people's dissatisfaction with the government and ruling parties is backed up by international election observers' reports (Hyde & Marinov, 2014; Corstange & Marinov 2012), as OSCE report on the 2016 Moldovan elections revealed (OSCE, 2016).

### **Vote and discontent. Cross-country electoral protests**

Any action that intends to influence the electoral competition in an illicit, unfair, hidden or dissimulated manner can be called fraud. Thus, "common sense initially suggests that an activity is fraudulent if its perpetrator wants it hidden from the public gaze. Manifestly fraudulent behaviours [...] are things that only its victims want publicized. Even procedural violations, such as polling station opening late and closing early or failing to advertise its location before election day, sound like fraud because the accused would prefer that no one learn of these facts" (Lehoucq, 2003: 235). Electoral fraud takes many forms, from changes in electoral law intended to distort results, ballot rigging, and the use of violence to intimidate voters, poll watchers or political adversaries, to paying people to vote a certain candidate or not to vote at all (Lehoucq & Molina, 2002). Fraud not only threatens political stability, but it also undermines the credibility of institutions and deepens the disparities between elites and society. In the Romanian and Moldovan context, the incentive of uprisings was the accusation of fraud against political authorities, suspected by the critical mass of using the political and administrative infrastructure in order to convert the results of the elections in their favour. On this point, it becomes mandatory to understand who are the main political actors, their opponents, and the stake of the electoral protests.

#### ***Electoral protest and political environment***

In Romania, the political dynamics were dominated by the rivalries of the cohabitation between the president Traian Basescu, on one hand, and the Prime Minister, Victor Ponta (member of the Social-Democrats), on the other hand. In spite of being appointed as PM after the riots from 2012 and in the context of negotiations within SLU coalition, he continued his mandate even after the coalition was dissolved. In 2014, the former members of the coalition, SDP and NLP, disputed their candidates (Victor Ponta for SDP and Klaus Iohannis for

NLP) during the presidential elections. The day after the first round elections, thousands of people on the streets of Romanian cities accused the government of fraud, while expressing their solidarity with diaspora. Their complaints concerned the decreased number of polling stations abroad compared to other previous elections and their obstinacy to respect the closing hours, despite the amount of people standing in line for hours to vote (Actamedia, 2014a; Actamedia, 2014b; Schwartz, 2014; The Economist, 2014). Images depicting kilometre-long queues in front of the election offices that were intensively shared on social media increased the outrage of people both living abroad and in Romania and mobilized them during the protests. Moreover, Iohannis transformed this situation into an electoral advantage by explicitly affirming his support for the protesters and diaspora voters and criticising the decisions made by the government in organizing the voting process abroad (Sibinescu, 2016).

The Prime-Minister and his government ignored the social pressure and, as a consequence, the second round elections have been organized in a similar manner as the previous ones. During the evening of the second round of elections, thousands of people were already on the streets (Euronews, 2014; Ilie, 2014) protesting against him. Later on, the results of the elections confirmed their expectations (Rippingale, 2014). Thus, Iohannis became president due to the impressive mobilization of Romanian citizens both within the borders and abroad against the leading party and the government (Ciobanu, 2014; Global Public Policy Watch, 2014; Stavila, 2014). However, his success was not result of a general support and sympathy for his electoral program, but rather a negative reaction to the Ponta's increasing unpopularity.

As for Moldova, in January 2016 a new political crisis occurred concerning the appointment of another government and new rallies were organized against several attempts to name oligarchic politicians (BBC, 2016; Gillet, 2016). Last, but not least, protests which concern me most were organized in November, the same year, when the socialist and pro-Russian controversial politician, Igor Dodon, won the elections. Protesters, mostly educated young people, accused the government of fraud, and attempt to prevent citizens from exerting their civil rights, and demanded new round of elections (Calcea, 2016a; Press TV, 2016; Radio Free Europe, 2016). Moldovan citizens have not been able to vote in polling locations abroad that lacked ballot papers. In London, Paris, Dublin or Milano they formed massive lines in front of polling stations (Calcea, 2016b; Calcea, 2016c; E-Democracy, 2016; Solovyov, 2016; Vlas, 2016).

### ***Opportunities for protests. Fraud, elections and diaspora***

In both the Romanian and Moldovan cases, fraud was condemned in the protesters' claims. On one hand, in Moldova they accused pro-Russian parties and candidates of ballot rigging, paying voters during the Election Day or insufficient ballot papers in the polling stations abroad. On the other, in Romania, the decision to decrease of number of polling stations abroad and to close them earlier can also be perceived as fraud because the intention of the government consisted in preventing members of the diaspora to vote.

The overview of the Romanian and Moldovan uprisings highlight the fact that election protests have followed in both cases other previous manifestations against corruption, inequality, clientelism, undemocratic decisions and illiberal practices. Moreover, the anaemic civil society transformed itself step by step (Badescu, Sum & Uslaner, 2004) and became an incentive for political change. The Romanian and Moldovan scenes faced several relevant episodes, some of them mentioned above, when pressure exerted by civil society overthrew prime ministers and other high political figures. Nevertheless, there is one significant difference between them. In Moldova, all protests were organized by civil society with the support of political parties from the opposition, whilst in Romania protesters strongly refused any involvement of political parties. Perhaps this is the reason why Moldovan contesting groups used the social capital achieved during uprisings as source of electoral capital in forthcoming elections, whilst Romanian civil society failed to offer a political counterweight to existing parties (a few of the Save Romania Union' candidates had been previously active in NGOs, but it cannot be called a party emerging from the active civil society during the protests; there are however, high hopes for Demos, a social-democrat civil platform which might turn soon into a political party).

The 2014 electoral protests from Romania expressed energy and force accumulated during previous civil manifestations that occurred before. The fact that citizens accomplished short-term successes increased their confidence that their actions can transform grievances into solutions. Past protests revealed an increasing culture of protests that helped dissatisfied citizens to spontaneously express their frustrations and simultaneously contributed to the accumulation of resources necessary in future manifestations. A feature of the Romanian culture protest that gained visibility with every new protest is the solidarity of the diaspora and its readiness to express its discontent when those in the homeland did it. During the Romanian Autumn, in dozens of cities abroad, Romanian diaspora condemned political parties for their incapacity to generate economic growth and for indirectly forcing them to migrate. The number of Romanian citizens displayed outside the borders for economic reasons surpassed 3 million in 2015 and the growth of the Romanian diaspora in the last 15 years placed it in the second position, after Syria (United Nations, 2016: 19). In this context, it is obvious why people protested when diaspora was prevented from voting during the presidential elections.



The Moldovan uprisings from 2016 had undoubtedly been influenced by the Romanian experience due to several reasons: a) the historical relations remembering the time when Moldova was part of Romania have been invoked in the 2016 uprising, as in other previous episodes; protesters were demanding reunification with Romania; b) especially in Eastern Romania, there is a considerable Moldovan diaspora and the number of Moldovan citizens demanding Romanian citizenship increases annually (Ursu, 2013). At the same time, a consistent Moldovan diaspora lives in Russia which also recently faced similar uprisings. In the anti-fraud protests in Russia from 2011 until 2013, the stalwart and the casual participants played different roles and had different dynamics of mobilization. The first ones, mobilized through their personal day life personal contacts, were more determined to oppose Kremlin, whilst the second ones, more sceptical about the results, used mostly social media to stay informed and to get in touch with the others (Smyth, Sobolev & Soboleva, 2013). Nevertheless, they were all contesting the results of the elections for the Duma, the autocratic ruling pattern of Vladimir Putin and the declining economic outcomes. Despite the narrow base of support from the society and the repressive reaction of the police towards riots, participants' involvement became constant in the last years and their opposition and stubbornness more virulent across the years (Evans, 2016).

Social media played a significant role in the mobilization and organization of protests and simultaneously engaged diaspora in bonding with participants (Giglou, Ogan & d'Haenens, 2016). Diaspora' involvement in the homeland politics (Vimalarajah & Cheran, 2010) can switch the expected results of the elections, especially if it forcefully criticises the ruling party or the government. In both situations, governments deprived citizens leaving abroad from their right to vote and seemed to react as if diaspora unrightfully claimed special favours. The ruling party did not trust it, nor did it rely upon its electoral support. On the contrary, by preventing it to vote, the ruling party proved that diaspora was rather an insignificant electoral group or, more plausibly, an unpredictable and uncontrollable electoral category, too pretentious and dissatisfied by the homeland politics in order to be easily pleased. Unlike Moldova, the mobilization of the Romanian voters and diaspora changed the results of the election. If at the beginning of the campaign, Prime-Minister Ponta was already considered in many political entourages as the new president, towards the end, the voting issues of diaspora and the use of social media turned the tide in Iohannis's favour.

## Conclusions

All political regimes invest in elections because they are the primary source of legitimacy. In both authoritarian and democratic regimes, they are used to conserve the political privileges or to achieve them. Nevertheless, all political actors invest resources to turn elections in their favour. Once politicians win the elections, they seek to maintain their political positions by transforming the political and administrative apparatus into instrument for achieving their goals. Distrust, dissatisfaction and rage are then suddenly expressed in spontaneous protests that use stolen elections or fraud as triggers for social mobilization (Fearon, 2011; Kuntz and Thompson, 2009). Be it excessive or marginal (Simper, 2013: 25), electoral fraud is a powerful incentive for civil resistance and the recent contentious episodes from Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Romania, Moldova or Russia are expressing it. Even though in some isolated situations protests can boost trust in government (Frye & Borisova, 2016), they rather express civil discontent and distrust.

Changing the rules of the electoral procedures in order to favour specific political actors represents a common tactic throughout the world. It happened in Iran (2009), Senegal in 2012 (Demarest, 2015), Hungary in 2013 (The Guardian, 2013) or Turkey in 2017 (Soguel, 2017). In some cases, people demanded open and free elections, while in others they simply rejected the results. Electoral protests can sometimes be striking manifestations in the name of democracy mainly because they express the tension between principles such as rule of law, transparency, legality and openness and political practices which undermine democracy. Fraud represents a dangerous tool in the hands of those political actors and parties that seek to keep the power or to achieve it by disrespecting the rules of a fair and transparent electoral competition. Thus, election protests attempt to restore democracy in those moments when it is threatened by robbery and bribery. They are a necessary part of a healthy democracy; they do not aim to destabilize the political system *per se*, but instead promote the interests and will of civil groups that are in conflict with specific political and legal decisions. They create a check-and-balances mechanism through which those who do not have direct access to political power and decision-making process *per se* can have their demands heard in a collective, organized, public and non-violent manner, whilst governments are constrained to listen to them.

The Romanian and Moldovan contentious episodes from 2014, respectively 2016, deserve the attention of scholars primarily because of their striking similarities in spite of all background disparities (EU membership, economic growth and so on). These two countries are rarely put in the same context and protests seem to me an appropriate pretext for doing it. Thus, I tried to highlight the political and social environment that determined the rise of civil unrest by taking into consideration two main aspects: on one hand, the dynamics between political groups and on the other, the key-role of diaspora as incentive and agent

for political change. Secondly, a comparative analysis of the two uprisings can provide added value to the social movements and culture protest literature. Thus, the contentious experience of Moldova and Romania offer many resourceful ideas for future researches. Moreover, I think that an in-depth analysis of the connection between civil society in both countries and the manner in which they influence each other would be a challenging and insightful framework for understanding their social dynamics, political competitions and civil constraints.

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