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## Voices of discontent: Student protest participation in Romania

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### ABSTRACT

In January 2012, in several cities of Romania, people turned out to streets to protest. The protests were linked to the wave of movements such as the Indignados or Occupy Wall Street. The students were especially visible among protesters. In this paper, we show that the profile of protests in Romania witnessed a significant shift from workers strikes for higher wages and better jobs, during communism and in the 1990ies, to social movements in which young urban educated citizens mobilize with the help of social networks for issues that are linked to the quality of democracy and life.

Furthermore, the shift in protesting is associated, at the individual level, with distrust of the political system, which stimulates engaging in demonstrations. Interestingly, online activism accelerates the feeling of shared distrust of institutions, motivating youth to engage in protest participation, although the effects might be moderate and the causal arrow somewhat uncertain. The hypotheses are tested with data from a general survey on participation in 2012 and a student survey from October 2012. We find that gender, distrust in institutions and family income influence protest behavior. Time spent online has a negative effect on protest engagement and online activism is related to protest behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

On November 7, 2011, six activists occupied a deserted building in the downtown of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, to protest against a large mining project in Western Carpathians by a Toronto listed company, Gabriel Resources. The police removed them by force, issued 2500 lei (600 euro) fines for each and initiated criminal prosecutions. This is only one case of a series of protests taking place in 2011, sharing with the others two characteristics: small number of participants and harsh repression by authorities. Systematic data show that Romanians tended to protest less often than citizens in the neighboring Hungary or countries such as Poland and Czech Republic (Badescu et al., 2004). Yet, starting with January 12, 2012, several thousands of Romanians turned out to streets to protest, as a reaction to the governments' attempts to undergo several changes to the medical system. Raed Arafat, a physician well known for initiating a successful emergency service system and a member of the Government, had resign in protest against plans to increase privatization of health care system. In the evening following his resignation, several hundreds of citizens turned out to protest in Targu Mures, the city where Raed Arafat was coming

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from. In the following days, thousands of citizens from several other cities, including Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara, Oradea, Constanta and Arad, joined the protests. Increasingly, the protests turned into a manifestation of discontent against politicians and political parties. Senior citizens protested against the reduction and taxation of pensions higher than 250 euro. The associations representing citizens who participated in the 1989 revolution protested against the cuts in benefits operated by the government.

Other protested against president Bănescu's authoritarian character. There were groups that protested against the Gold Corporations (Mercea, 2011) plan to mine for gold in Rosia Montana while others asked for a democratic system without political parties and politicians (Stoica and Mihailescu, 2012). Students, who represented the most influential and vocal group, protested because of the underfinanced system of education and against the Roșia Montană mining project. The protests culminated in the resignation of the entire government on February 6, 2012.

The magnitude of the 2012 protests was significantly smaller than the demonstrations in 1990, the last time when Romanians protested on how democracy should develop, with estimates averaging around 10,000 participants (Stoica and Mihailescu, 2012).

The Internet and Facebook played a significant role in mobilizing the participants of the 2012 protests. There were hundreds of blogs and sites, as well as Facebook events that called people to protest (Stoica and Mihailescu, 2012; Gutu, 2012; Dohotaru, 2012).

What have determined Romanian citizens to turn to protest? What does set these protests apart from the revolts in the 1990s and during communism? In this paper we answer these questions and emphasize the peculiar character of the protests for the post-communist Romania.

The first section aims to clarify the concept of political participation and to review how socio-demographic characteristics and Internet have impacted participation of youth and students in previous studies. We place a special emphasize on the potential effects of Internet, which we assert to be a medium of shared-discontent that creates a favorable environment for protest participation. Next we discuss the methodology and data. Then we focus the analysis on the participatory practices of students, compared to adults from Romania. Finally we explain and discuss protest participation of students analyzing their socio-demographic background, political engagement, values, time spent online and online activism and highlight the peculiarity of protesting in 2011 and 2012.

## 2. Protest participation in communist and post-communist Romania

The single party rule of the Romanian Communist Party lasted from 1947 to 1989. During that time there were several instances of protests and movements pointed against the low wages and working conditions, but only rarely against the communist regime. Between 1949 and 1962, peasants revolted against the forced land collectivization implemented by the communist authorities (Kligman and Verdery, 2012). The protests and opposition were crushed, with around 80,000 being jailed (Ciobanu, 2009). The Romanian anti-communist resistance movement was active from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, with isolated individual fighters remaining at large until the early 1960s. The National Council for the Study of the Securitate (CNSAS) estimates that the total number of active resistance fighters was higher than 10,000, with at least 40–50,000 supporting persons (CNSAS, 2003). The social structure of the insurgent groups was heterogeneous, including a large number of peasants, many students and intellectuals as well as several army officers (Deletant, 1998).

Nicolae Ceausescu came to power after the defunct Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej in 1968. He initiated a large scale industrialization that created a working class, which by the beginning of 1980s reached 50% of the working population (Ciobanu, 2009). Similarly to Poland and Hungary, in Romania most of dissent and protest participation was initiated by workers and intellectuals (Angi, 2011; Keil and Keil, 2002; Laba, 1991). In Poland, the trade unions organized into a large network and managed to be taken into account by the communist leadership and negotiate improvements of working conditions. They also collaborated with dissident intellectuals (Angi, 2011; Laba, 1991) especially at the end of the 1970s. In Hungary, the revolution of 1956, led to the creation of a post-Stalinist system, that was legitimized by a compromise between communist control over the politics and a less regulated economy with some degree of censorship over artists and writers, or as Haraszti (1988) called it "The Velvet Prison".

In Romania, none of the manifestations of dissent matched the large scale protesting in Poland during Solidarity or Hungary during the 1956 revolution. Notably, there were some instances of individual dissent that received international support. Vasile Paraschiv, a worker from Brașov and a member of the communist party, wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, in which he identified eleven problems addressing the organization of trade unions and the working conditions of the workers. As a result, Paraschiv was arrested and then confined to a psychiatric hospital. Paul Goma and Doina Cornea also wrote open letters in which, the former expressed support for the Charter 77 and the latter criticized the regime of Nicolae Ceausescu.

Compared to other countries in Eastern Europe, in Romania during communism there were very few instances of large scale public protests (Siani-Davies, 2005). The spontaneous revolt of the miners in Jiu Valley, in 1977, was an outcome of the worsening working conditions (Cesereanu, 2004; Kideckel, 2008). Ceausescu had to meet with the protesters and promised them to fulfill everything the miners requested. However, shortly after he left the Jiu Valley area was isolated and the leaders of protesters were jailed and an intense indoctrination process started to prevent protest outbursts (Kideckel, 2008). Worsening poverty sparked the second mass revolt in 1987. Food, electricity, hot water shortages and low wages led workers from the Truck Factory "Steagul Roșu" (Red Flag) from Brașov to organize and protest (Keil and Keil, 2002). About 400 workers

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