

Social Networks and Social Revolution. Evidence from Romania

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Abstract

During recent years, social networks have changed the paradigm in mass communication, introducing speed and interactivity that were not possible by using traditional mobilization resources. In a few years, social networks have become the voice of society, as they represent a new source of information and expression that provides resourceful means to mobilize the citizens. No other means of communication have had such a rapid development as the Internet, a medium that is undoubtedly changing the rules of the political game. In this article, we take a look at the use of social networks during social and political movements, with particular focus on the 2014, 2015 and 2017 Romanian protests. We conclude that social networks alone do not instigate revolutions, but they are valuable tools for citizens to organize free protests, recruit and train participants, which can lead to further collective action and social change.

Key words: Social networks; Social revolution; Romanian protests

J.E.L. Classification: L1

1. Introduction

The XXI century has been defined by a series of concepts specific to the evolution of society, such as stability, peace, integrity, tolerance and interculturality (Brownlee, 2002) (Hegre, H., Ellingsen, T., Gates, S., & Gleditsch, N., 2001) (Howard & Parks, 2012). These are the features of a developed, globalized and, of course, democratic state. Throughout the years, living in democracy has become people's ultimate aspiration, especially if they had been living in nondemocratic regime (Gilley, 2006) (Castells, 2007) (Wolfsfeld, G, Segev, E, & Sheaffer, T, 2013).

According to Sakbani (Sakbani, 2011) and Segev (Segev, 2011), social organization becomes a public sphere when people act politically in common and when participatory democracy is encouraged. The 2011 protests were movements which created public spheres of political communication and controlled the public spaces in a self-directed manner: Tahrir Square in Cairo; Syntagma Square in Athens; Puerta del Sol in Madrid; Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona; Zuccotti Park in New York; Cathedral of St. Paul and Finsbury Square in London (Epstein, Nisbet, & Gillespie, 2011) (Groshek, 2009).

As social networks are becoming increasingly integrated into everyday life, a massive amount of research has been dedicated to the role of social networks in enabling new forms of civic engagement and political participation. During the last years, Facebook and Twitter have begun to play a major role worldwide. With more than a billion monthly active users, Facebook qualifies as the most popular social network around the world, even if there are countries where local social networks are still the most popular (in China and Russia, for instance). Even if Twitter is less more popular than Facebook, it provides specific features that appear effective in information sharing and in supporting activism and mobilization (Best & Wade, 2009).

The popularity of social networks did not pass unnoticed by the people who were searching for new ways of sharing information around the world. As a result, social networks started to be used in political campaigns, protests, demonstrations, in an attempt to reach out to new activists (Mattes & Bratton, 2007) (Welzel, 2007). But using social networks is not always as simple as it may seem,

as the authorities have access to information posted on Facebook, including private messages, and can use the internet to collect information about the protests. Governments and secret services can easily monitor information about protesters by searching their Facebook or Google profile, where they can find personal information that facilitates the discovery of the person. The authorities have the power to shut down web pages, or can create fake events to lure protesters to places where intervention forces can capture them (Xenos & Moy, 2007) (Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007) (van Zomeren, Spears, & Leach, 2008) (Wilson & Dunn, 2011).

One of the concerns that are presented in various studies refers to the role that social networks play in the ability of challengers to mobilize collective action (Hussain & Howard, 2013) (Goldstone, 2011). Although social media's ubiquity made it easier for people to mobilize for collective action, sceptics (the so called "cyber-sceptics) claim that their role was exaggerated, arguing that using the Internet gives people a false sense of participation and keeps them from actual physical protesting (Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013) (Hussain & Howard, 2013). On the other hand, the "cyber-enthusiasts" consider that social networks are essential tools, as they empower citizens living in nondemocratic countries (Wilson & Dunn, 2011).

In addition, critics argue whether social networks offer real support to the protesters or their impact was misunderstood due to the massive word of mouth generated. Eltantay and Wiest consider that social networks should be considered important tools for protest if and when there is sufficient access and motivation (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Social networks' rapidity and ubiquity allow groups to organize and mobilize much more efficiently than in the past; protesters can post real time information that motivates other protesters and send messages without any geographic limitations (Castells M. 2., 2008). All of these features have the potential to mobilize third parties into the conflict. Segerberg and Bennett consider that Social media should be seen as facilitators of protest rather than causes (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011).

Overall, scholars agree that the contribution of the new networks was essential in performing two overlapping functions: organizing the protests and disseminating information about them, including publicizing protesters' demands internationally (for instance, Facebook reportedly outmatched Al Jazeera in at least the speed of news dissemination).

2. Using social networks in Romania

2.1. The 2014 protests

In Romania, social networks appeared in 2008, with the rise of Facebook and Twitter. The most popular online platforms among Romanian users are Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Google, Flickr, and LinkedIn. Facebook has experienced impressive growth in the recent years, more than 9.200.0000 users being registered on the Romanian territory in at the beginning of 2017 (Facebrands, 2017).

Social Media represented one of the most prolific channels of spreading information during the Romanian protests in 2014, 2015 and 2017. Social networks proved to be a proper medium for propaganda, as well as relevant tools for organizing and coordinating protests.

The presidential elections of 2014 are the first example of how social networks lead to mass mobilisation. The 2014 presidential elections in Romania were held in two rounds on November 2nd and November 16th 2014. In the second round the battle was between the candidates Victor Ponta (Romanian prime-minister) with 40.44 % of votes, and Klaus Johannis (mayor of Sibiu) with 30.37%, respectively. Due to the number of polling stations abroad (294 sections) and the deficient process of voting outside the country, thousands of Romanians were not able to vote until polls closed, although they had been waiting for several hours in various European cities. The Federation of Romanian Associations in Europe has asked the Central Electoral Bureau to extend the program of polling stations abroad where tens of thousands of people were unable to vote until the polls closed. The Romanian Government refused to increase the number of voting units, even though The Central Elections Office gave its permission. Some candidates, as well as the incumbent Romanian president, Traian Basescu, asked for the resignation of the Government due to poor organization of the elections.

As a result of the organization of the elections, thousands of Romanians started demonstrations against both in the country and in other European cities. The protests gathered more than 5 000 people in Timisoara, 10 000 in Cluj, 4 000 in Bucharest and 2 000 in Iasi, as well as in other cities (Realitatea, 2014). The protesters asked for fair elections in Romania and Diaspora, so that people can express their right to vote. Also, the Romanians protested against Prime Minister Ponta and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The social platforms have hosted several pages of events where Romanians were invited to take part to the demonstrations, were encouraged to exercise their right to vote, and show their support for the Romanians from the Diaspora who had difficulties in expressing their vote in the first round. On the Facebook event page "On November 14, we choose freely in the street! (Romania)" 48.000 people announced their participation in the protests.

In the second round, the election process in Diaspora continued to be a problem. Romanians all around the world posted messages on their social platforms complaining about the poor organization of elections and encouraged their family and friends in the country to go to vote. In the end, with a turnout of over 10% higher than the first round, Iohannis has obtained 6,288,769 votes, representing 54.43% of options. Iohannis' victory was decisive in Diaspora, with 88% of the votes (Mediafax, 2014).

2.2. The 2015 protests

Another example of mass mobilization throughout Social Media is represented by the 2015 protests generated by a massive fire in a Bucharest club who led to 64 people dead and 186 injured.

The fire at the club Colectiv in Bucharest took place on October 30, 2015, inside a club located in Sector 4 of Bucharest in a former factory hall. The fire started during a concert of the band Goodbye to Gravity. According to existing data, the fire was caused by the fireworks used during the concert, which ignited the polyurethane sponge used for soundproofing on a pillar of the building. The flames quickly spread throughout the club causing injuries - in some cases even death to a significant number of participants. The fire in the club Collective led to the 64 people dead and 186 injured. The magnitude of the event prompted the Ministry of Interior to establish the red intervention plan and the Romanian Government decreed three days of national mourning.

The investigations revealed that the club was functioning without the approval of the Fire department. The pyrotechnic demonstrations were not allowed and the polyurethane sponge used for soundproofing was highly inflammable and should not have been used. In addition, the club allowed more than 400 people, when its legal capacity was 100. The terrible event generated 10 days of protests, people asking for the resignation of Prime Minister Victor Ponta, Minister of Defence, Gabriel Oprea, and the mayor of District 4 of Bucharest, Cristian Popescu (Mediafax, 2015).

The revolution on Facebook generation started in the same place where the 1989 Revolution began 26 years ago: in University Square. The massive amount of posts on Social Media led to 25 000 Romanians who protested in the street. President Klaus Iohannis published a post on his Facebook page, supporting the manifestations and saying that this event cannot be ignored by the political class (Gandul, 2015).

As a result of the massive protests that followed the fire, The Government and the mayor of Sector 4 resigned. One of the demands of the protesters was the abolition of the current Government and the instauration of a technocratic Government. President Iohannis invited members of the civil society to discuss about the election of a new Government and, in the end, a technocratic Government was appointed.

2.3. The 2017 protests

One month after the Parliamentary elections on December 11th, 2016, the newly sworn in cabinet of prime minister Sorin Grindeanu gave an emergency ordinance to approve a law modifying the Penal Code and Penal Procedure Code (especially concerning the power abuse). The law had been debated before and it was considered controversial, as it raised accusations that the ordinance was encouraging corruption and would help hundreds of current and former politicians

to escape ongoing criminal investigations or prison sentences. Despite the negative reactions from both the judicial institutions and the public, the ordinance was approved on January, 31st 2017, during a night session.

The news of the newly approved ordinance led to more than 25 000 people who protested that night in various cities of Romania. The protests continued daily for the next days, reaching their peak on February 5th, with over 500 000 people protesting in the capital and other Romanian cities (Aljazeera, 2017). The 2017 protests became the largest protests in the history of Romania, overcoming the ones in 1989, when the communist regime fell and the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu was executed. During the protests, the president of Romania and also members of the opposition took part of the events, expressing their opinion against Government's act.

During the protests, users have started to massively use hashtags across all social networks, such as #rezist, #neamsaturat, #vavedem, #neamunit, #noaptecatehotii etc. in order to expand the notoriety and visibility of the protests. Social networks contributed to the rapid dissemination of messages and real-time information, as well as spreading not just the ideological message but also the training program and the operational plan. People were able to call for a protest in seconds without preparing a demonstration for a given date (Official Facebook page, 2017).

After five days of protesting the government announced it would withdraw the contested ordinance. Three days later the minister of Justice, Florin Iordache, responsible for putting forward the ordinance, presented his resignation.

The protests in Romania, attended by thousands of demonstrators, have attracted the attention of the international press, so journalists from important televisions or foreign publications came to the country to broadcast live the protests. What is more, Romania became the European country with the highest number of live videos on Facebook during the protests. According to the Facebook map, most of the filming took place in Bucharest, some of them being in the top of world's most viewed movies, with over 40 000 real-time views (Facebrands, 2017).

3. Conclusions

Even though social networks are not powerful enough to generate revolutions by themselves, they can be effective tools for training, recruitment and organization. Social networks' impact is influenced by numerous contextual factors and the role of Social Media should be related to fair accessibility for the population. The purpose of any protest is to inspire and motivate people to leave the comfort of their homes in exchange for direct participation in the demonstrations. Social networks allow organizers to virtually protest. But a group created on Facebook will not be able to motivate people to go out in the streets. Many people prefer to become virtual fans of a group, rather than actual riot participants. Thus, the primary purpose of any virtual protest is to turn virtual actions into real events.

What is more, social networks' effects will not be as strong if people's access to internet is limited or denied. Also, if we take into consideration the setting of neo patrimonial states, it can be rather hard for people to protest against the dictatorship, and in this case Social Media are not enough to make them act. Even if social networks can be effective in organizing movements, they cannot provide the inner motivation. What is more, we cannot disregard the cyber sceptics' claims pointing out that security forces can also use social media to monitor the population and to thwart protesters. All in all, social networks are powerful tools and during last years have proved that no region, state, or form of government can remain immune to the impact of new information and communication technologies.

4. References

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