

## **Rediscovering Protest: Reflections on the Development and Consequences of the Early 2012 Romanian Protests**

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**Abstract.** Since early 2012, Romania has recorded an increased mobilization in the protest arena. Contentious episodes have erupted recurrently since then and most of them had notable political impact in curbing certain public policies, influencing election results and dismissing national governments. A new taste for protest actions seems to emerge in Romania since people are increasingly eager to challenge political elites on various grounds. However, the upsurge of protest mobilization in recent years came about after a relatively long period of widespread estrangement from politics and public sphere during the post-communist transition of this country. This article aims to reconstruct people's perceptions of the socio-economical and political conditions in which protest mobilizations emerged in 2012 in order to shed some light on how and why Romanians have moved from apathy to political action in the aftermath of the economic crisis.

**Keywords:** *protest, electoral participation, economic crisis, post-communist Romania.*

### **Introduction**

As a response to the economic crisis, the Romanian government adopted in 2010 some of the most severe austerity measures in Europe (Stoiciu, 2012). The hardships created by these policies have provoked growing popular discontent culminating in urban mass demonstrations in the first months of 2012. Street demonstrations lasted for weeks in Bucharest and in other Romanian cities and were some of the biggest rallies recorded since the country has joined the European Union in 2007. Protests fuelled political antagonism and furthered anti-presidential and anti-governmental feelings that were capitalized by the opposition parties in the 2012 local and legislative elections, which recorded a massive vote against the former center-right ruling party (King & Marian, 2014). The increased political engagement of Romanians during the economic crisis seems to break the general pattern of widespread estrangement from politics and public sphere, which has characterized the post-communist transition of this country. This study aims to explore some of the reasons behind the revival of political activism in Romania. It

also reflects on the emergence of a new taste for protest among Romanians in the aftermath of the economic crisis. Finally, the paper argues that the early 2012 protests might have had a 'demonstration effect' for further elite challenging actions and thus, these protests seem to have broader significance for democratic governance and for political culture in Romania.

To understand how Romanians turned from political apathy to protest mobilization in the aftermath of the economic crisis we propose a contextualized analysis (see Sommier & Fillieule, 2013) of the conditions in which the early 2012 protest emerged. How it was possible that for a period of several weeks so many people took to the streets in a country previously known for its citizens' political apathy and resigned acceptance of corruption and bad governance. In aiming to answer this question, we combine macro-structural and micro-individual approaches based on the underlying assumption that agency is inherent in the development of structure on the one hand, and structure is, to a certain degree, influencing action, on the other hand (Della Porta, 2014, p. 16). Thus at the macro level we emphasize the dynamics of the socio-economical and political contexts in which the protest demonstrations emerged, while at the individual level we highlight people's perceptions of the socio-political conditions. A focus on people's perceptions of contextual factors is justified by a fundamental assumption asserted in the social psychology literature: people live in a perceived world and they "respond to the world as they perceive and interpret it" (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013, p. 886). A third element, intervening in the interplay between contextual conditions and people's perceptions, is the media, which frames social and political problems and thus might influence how people understand and interpret political issues (Johnston & Noakes, 2005). Moreover, Walgrave and Manssens (2005) point out that framing activities performed by the media can successfully take over protest mobilization functions normally performed by movement organizations. Media frames as mobilizing factors are also relevant in the Romanian case, since the early 2012 street demonstrations emerged without notable preexisting movement organizations and discernable mobilizing organizational apparatus, and had no direct and consistent support from traditional mobilizing agents (see Tătar, 2015) such as unions, professional associations or civil society organizations.

The first section of the paper outlines the main arguments of several theoretical models commonly used in the literature to explain protest participation.

The second section contextualizes protest and electoral participation in Romania before the economic crisis by pointing out a general decline of citizen participation since the fall of the communist regime. Afterwards, the third section emphasizes the main economical, social and political developments during the economic crisis that have come with the upsurge of political activism and have shaped the forms through which people voiced their discontents. The fourth section discusses the dynamics of January-February 2012 protests, and subsequently their specific electoral and political impacts. The concluding section highlights the main findings and their implications for our understanding on how economic crises might reshape people's attitudes toward democratic governance and politics in general.

### **Sociopolitical context, public perceptions and frames of protest: some theoretical arguments**

Classical theorists of contestation politics argue that people engage in protests to express their grievances (Berkowitz, 1972; Gurr, 1970; Lind & Tyler, 1988). The perceived sources of grievances relate to the way protests are framed. For instance, Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013) claim that in a protest that is framed as a "conflict of interests" people are more inclined to take an instrumental route to protest to enforce change, while in a protest framed as a "conflict of principles" individuals are more likely to participate to express their views and indignation due to perceptions that important values or norms have been violated. However, this analytical differentiation does not exclude the situations in which people participating in protests have a mix of attitudes, combining instrumentality and indignation. Usually, protests organized by well established organizations such as trade unions might illustrate in many aspects a conflict of material interests. On the other hand, social movement activism against governmental corruption, bad governance and policies that raise environmental issues might typify protests framed as conflicts of principles.

In turn, the way conflicts are framed affects the routes people take to protest. As Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2013, p. 895) argue, protest participation requires a shared definition of the situation that is a "shared interpretation of who should act, why and how". These interpretations are largely affected by the information disseminated by protest movements through a process known as *framing* (Benford & Snow, 2000). The more inclusive these frames are, the lower the barriers to identification with the protest movements' demands. In

this sense, Bennett (2012, p. 22) argues that the rise of crowd-sourced inclusive personal action frames that lower the barriers of identification (e.g. 'We are the 99 %') are part of what he calls the "personalization of politics." He contrasts these easily personalized frames with more conventional collective action frames (e.g. the leftist "Eat the rich") which he considers may require more socialization to spread in large numbers. Moreover, these personalized frames are easily propagated through new social media, which connects sometimes loosely structured social networks on the Internet. Bennett (2012, p. 22) also emphasizes that these communication networks enable "political organization and expression that often lacks, or actively shuns, clear central leaders and organizations". Such channels of mobilization, which easily distribute inclusive frames have become particularly salient in the case of recent protests that have mobilized most diverse individuals and groups against austerity measures all over the world.

While the conclusion of relative deprivation theories is that at the heart of every protest are grievances, not all aggrieved people protest. Only when additional factors come into play do grievances result into actual protest (Rucht, 2007). Political process theories suggest that in order to protest aggrieved people also need certain opportunities for collective political activity. Institutional approaches focus on the structure of opportunities for participation offered by institutional channels and procedures. At the macro level, comparative studies reveal significant differences between countries on opening up to citizen participation in public affairs. This institutional openness can inhibit or stimulate political engagement (Jackman, 1987; Powell, 1986). In terms of protest participation, democracies, compared to authoritarian regimes, foster collective mobilization by relaxing repression, encouraging associational life, and opening channels of popular participation (Johnston & Almeida, 2006). In this sense, democracies lower the cost of protest participation, while in the same time increasing its potential benefits. Thus, according to political process theories one should expect higher rates of protest participation in more democratic countries that guarantee more open political opportunity structures than non-democracies (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007).

However, Kitschelt (1986) shows that the features of political opportunity structures significantly vary across democracies. And one can add that they might also vary temporally within the same country. Kitschelt understands political opportunity structures as comprising three elements: specific configuration of

resources, institutional arrangements, and historical precedents that can further or hinder the development of protest movements in some instances. Configurations of resources refer to the set of coercive, normative, remunerative and informational resources that a social movement can extract from its setting and employ in its protest. The institutional arrangements refer to the level of access social movements have to the political decision-making apparatus and to the public sphere in general. Kitschelt argues that these two elements are relatively stable in time and he refers to them as the ‘political regime’ of a state. Historical precedents for mobilization refer to the success or failure of past movements, which may have a “demonstration effect” on incipient protest movements. Following Easton’s (1965) political system theory, Kitschelt distinguishes between two dimensions of political opportunity structures: the input side characterized as “open” or “close,” respectively the output side understood as either “strong” or “weak”. According to Kitschelt, the openness of the input side is determined by at least four elements: the number of political parties, factions and groups that effectively articulate different demands in electoral politics and the centrifugal tendencies within the party system; the independency of the legislative *vis-a-vis* the executive; pluralist patterns of intermediation between interest groups and the executive branch; mechanisms to aggregate demands such as procedures to build effective policy coalitions. The factors contributing to the ‘strength’ of the output side of the political opportunity structures include a centralizing tendency of the state apparatus, greater state control of the economy, and the control of the executive over the judiciary branch.

Kitschelt points out that a specific combination of openness of the input side and strength of the output side of the political opportunity structure influences both the strategies and impacts of protest movements in a particular country. For instance, he claims that when political systems are open and weak they invite assimilative strategies (i.e. lobbying, petitioning, elections, referendums, interventions in licensing procedures, litigation in courts) and movements attempt to work through existing institutional channels, which offer multiple points of access. On the other hand, in political systems that are closed and have strong capabilities to ward off threats to the implementation of policies, movements are likely to adopt confrontational strategies (i.e. public demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience) which are organized outside the established policy channels. In terms of impacts, Kitschelt (1986) distinguishes three types: *procedural impacts*

open new channels for protest actors and involve the recognition of them as legitimate representatives of demand; *substantive* gains are policy changes as a result of protest; and *structural impacts* which involve the transformation of the political opportunity structures themselves as a result of protest activity.

Apart from Kitschelt's (1986) focus on the formal structure of political opportunities, other political process theorists have also included informal elements in their explanatory models. For instance McAdam et al. (1996) have focused on four underlying dimensions of the political opportunity structure: the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; the stability or instability of the broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; the presence or absence of elite allies; the state's capacity and propensity to use repression against challenging movements. In a similar vein, Kriesi et al. (1992) argue that the formal institutional structure, the prevailing strategies to challengers, and the configuration of power (or the alliance structures) are the core elements of the political opportunity structure that influence both the strategies of protest movements and the responses of state actors. In all these theories the configuration of power is an important element since it affects the chances that protest movements find allies both in the party system to back up their demands, and also within the larger social movement environment for protest coalition building.

Beyond these general explanations, participation in protests or rather the lack of participation in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe is explained by the post-communist political disappointments felt by a significant part of the citizens of these states. Disillusionment with politics may be manifested by a sense of political inefficiency, lack of power, cynicism and distrust in the political process, politicians and political institutions, the belief that political elites are not concerned with the welfare of citizens, but without calling into question the legitimacy of the democratic system (di Palma, 1970; Torcal & Montero, 2006). The comparative politics literature points out two different conclusions about the behavioral consequences of disappointments with politics. On the one hand, studies in Western democracies highlight some positive consequences of critical assessments that their citizens have towards the institutions and political elites. Critical attitudes towards elites resulted in a transformation of relations between public authorities and citizens and increasing use of new forms of political participation, particularly protests (Dalton, 1999; Norris, 1999). On the other hand,

some authors believe that disappointments with politics are responsible, especially in new democracies, for citizens removal from political processes and the emergence of uninformed and apathetic citizenry (Torcal & Montero, 2006). Based on this second interpretation, it is expected that in the case of Romania too, disappointments with politics during the transition period are one of the main sources of political participation decline after 1989 (Tătar 2011c, Tătar 2015). But, as I show below, this model of political disillusionment sharply contrasts with the revitalization of political activism during the economic crisis, especially since 2012 a period in which there were higher rates of protest and electoral participation than political disaffection thesis would have predicted.

### **Contextualising political participation in Romania: disillusion and apathy**

The dynamics<sup>1</sup> of Romanians' attitudes towards politicians and politics supports the thesis of citizens' political disillusionment during the post-communist period (Tătar, 2011c). For example, the percentage of those who believe that one should not trust politicians, increased from 56.1% in 1990 to almost 70% in 2002. The public perceived a growing gap between politicians' views and people's problems and demands. For instance, in 1990 around 36% of the Romanians believed that politicians do everything to know people's opinions, while only 18.9% still believed this in 2002.

In addition, the share of those who perceive democratic governance in Romania as a participatory process decreases significantly during the first decade after the fall of the communist regime. Thus, while almost a third of the Romanian public agreed in 1990 that "everyone has a say in the public affairs of the country", only 27% supported this statement in 2002. On the other hand, the proportion of those who feel excluded from politics grows. People increasingly perceive politics as a rather closed process, reserved exclusively for politicians. Thus, from 1990 to 2002 there is a significant growth in the share of those who agree with the following statements: 'ordinary people are excluded from power' (from 57% to almost 80%), 'politicians are against people's engagement in governance' (from 66% to 80%), 'politicians are only interested

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis uses comparable data from the international survey Post-Communist Publics (see Fuchs, Klingemann, Roller, Wessels, & Simon, 2005) conducted in Romania on a nationally representative sample at the end of 1990 and the Public Opinion Barometer conducted in May-June 2002 and funded by Soros Foundation Romania.

in people's opinion during elections' (from about 68% to about 90%). Also during the transition period Romanians' cynicism regarding politicians and politics increases (Tătar, 2011b). For instance the proportion of those who agreed with the statement: 'only those who want to get rich are involved into politics' grew from about 50% in 1990 to about 84% in 2002. In this context, political engagement is rather perceived as a socially stigmatized activity instead of a civic virtue.

In terms of attitudes towards politics, the post-communist transition period in Romania can be characterized by 'the political alienation syndrome' (Tătar, 2011b). Symptoms of this political 'ailment' include: a reduced sense of political engagement as a civic duty, distrust of politicians, feelings of political exclusion, lack of interest in politics, perceptions of politics as being irrelevant to people's lives, feelings of helplessness and political inefficacy<sup>2</sup>, diminishing expectations regarding the solutions offered by the political sphere and also regarding the accountability of the political class in general (Tătar, 2011c). All these are unfavourable prerequisites of political participation in Romania after 1989.

Not surprisingly, Romania shows some of the sharpest decline of electoral and non-electoral participation rates within the former communist countries of Eastern Europe. For instance, turnout in parliamentary elections dramatically dropped from 86% in 1990 to 39% in 2008, and then slightly went up to 42% in the 2012 elections. In fact, voting in parliamentary elections declined continuously until 2008 and on average, nearly 10 percentage points were lost with each new row of elections since 1990 (Tătar, 2013). In addition, the availability of Romanians to protest and their actual participation in protest actions has also substantially decreased during 1995-2008, following a similar trend to electoral turnout. Thus, while in 1995<sup>3</sup> about 45% of Romanians were willing to participate in a lawful demonstration to defend their rights, in 2008 only about 23% said they would take part in this form of protest. The availability to sign a petition also declined: 38% of the respondents declared in

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<sup>2</sup> Political inefficacy is understood here both as the people's inability to influence political decisions and the lack of responsiveness of decision-makers to people's demands.

<sup>3</sup> Data come from the 1995 wave of World Values Survey and the 2008 wave of European Values Survey. See World Values Survey 1981-2008 - Official Aggregate, V. 2009.09.01 ASEP/JDS, (Madrid, World Values Survey Association) available at: [www.worldvaluessurvey.org](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org), accessed on 20 September 2012.

1995 that they would be willing to sign a petition, against only 20% in 2008. The actual participation in protest actions has also decreased significantly. For instance, the percentage of those who participated in lawful demonstrations dropped from 18.1% in 1995 to 6.8% in 2008, while the share of those declaring they have signed a petition declined from 14.3% 1995 to only 10.1% in 2008 (Tătar, 2011b).

Overall, political activism knows an obvious setback on most of its dimensions in Romania during the democratic reconstruction period that followed the communist breakdown in 1989. At the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, the majority of Romanians were not at all involved in politics, not even through the act of voting. Shrinking political participation appeared amid a deepening political alienation of a significant part of the population during the transition from communism. Thus, the revival political engagement among some parts of the population during the recent economic crisis is even more interesting as it emerged after a relatively long period of political apathy.

### **How do people come to resent their leaders? Concentration of power, austerity, bad governance and the personalization of blame**

Romania entered the global economic crisis after a continuous period of economic growth (2003-2008) which increased social expectations of improved living standards. It has also created a sense (or rather illusion) of relative prosperity although this was largely driven by short and long-term household indebtedness<sup>4</sup>. Towards the end of this period of continuous economic boom, a long electoral cycle (2007-2009) started with the partial European elections of 2007 (after the country has joined the Union) continued with the local and parliamentary elections of 2008, then with the European elections of June 2009 and ended with the highly controversial presidential ones, held in November-December 2009. The stakes and pressures of the electoral competitions “distracted policymakers from the early signs of budgetary crisis and fuelled their worst tendencies - lack of accountability in spending, clientelism at the national and local levels, and wildly unrealistic promises to the public” (Stefan & Ionita, 2011, p. 434).

After winning his second mandate in the 2009 presidential elections,

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<sup>4</sup> Loans have been used by many Romanians in this period to buy a wide range of assets from real-estate to high-tech and other consumer goods.

incumbent president Traian Băsescu managed to re-craft a new parliamentary majority around his centre-right Democrat-Liberal Party (PDL) backed up by the Democratic Union of Hungarians from Romania (UDMR). President Băsescu re-nominated the leader of the PDL, Emil Boc, as prime-minister. Boc's previous cabinet has been dismissed in Parliament by a vote of no-confidence in October 2009, after his coalition with the Social Democrat Party broke up in September the same year. Following the presidential elections in December 2009, splinter factions from the main opposition parties<sup>5</sup> have joined the newly created governing coalition which ensured the new Boc cabinet a tight, but stable and much disciplined parliamentary majority up until the spring of 2012. Since this new governing coalition owed its existence primarily to the re-election of Traian Băsescu and his ability to come up with a supportive parliamentary majority, the President assumed a leadership role in the new cabinet's governmental policy.

Not surprisingly the public perception was that in general, between 2010 and 2011, the President influenced all major governmental decisions. For instance, a public opinion survey carried out in December 2010, shows that about 54% of the Romanians believed that the President holds the real power in Romania<sup>6</sup>, compared to only 5% who believed the same about the Prime-Minister<sup>7</sup>. According to the same public opinion poll, businessmen were indicated by 13% of the respondents as holding the real power in Romania, thus being on the second place, but far behind the President, in terms of political influence as perceived by the public opinion.

The mechanism behind this perceived generalized control of the President was the widespread belief among the Romanian public that the President affects governmental decision-making through influence over submissive Prime Minister Boc. On its turn, the Government used in excess its ability to legislate by emergency ordinances and other procedures which bypass the deliberative process of adopting legislation in parliament. Moreover, the media repeatedly suggested that the President not only exerts an influence over the legislature through the

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<sup>5</sup> The Social-Democrat Party (PSD) and the National-Liberal Party (PNL), along with the minor Conservative Party (PC) formed in 2011 the Social-Liberal Union (USL), a political alliance opposing President Băsescu and his center-right government formed around PDL.

<sup>6</sup> The rest of the response options (i.e. local political leaders, the prime-minister, secret services, media tycoons, citizens, etc.) have each been chosen by less than 10% of the respondents.

<sup>7</sup> IRES (2011) *Raport de evaluare Romania 2010 - Perceptia riscului si comportamente de adaptare* (Cluj-Napoca, Institutul Roman pentru Evaluare si Strategie - IRES).

governing coalition but also over some parts of the judicial branch by having the final say in the appointments of the chief public prosecutors<sup>8</sup>.

The perception of power concentration in president, highly speculated and maintained by the anti-presidential media, was reinforced by several public discourses of the President in which he indicated what should be further directions of governmental policies<sup>9</sup>. The President's assumed a leadership role in governmental decision-making became evident on 6 May 2010, when after a discussion with the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) delegation in Romania, President Băsescu announced some of the most harsh austerity measures adopted in an EU member state: the reduction of wages in the public sector with 25%, a decrease in pensions by 15%, reduced subsidies and the elimination of some social protection measures, and the reduction of unemployment benefits by 15%. The austerity measures announced by the President have been adopted and implemented by the cabinet of Prime-Minister Boc, except for the 15% pensions' drop, which has been rejected by a ruling of the Constitutional Court.

Romania completed during 2009-2013 two agreements with the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the World Bank, amounting to 25.2 billion Euros, of which 18.9 billion Euros were actually pulled (Diaconu, 2013). The budgetary restrictions brought about by these agreements implied significant social costs. Without the intention of being exhaustive, I am briefly mentioning some of the most important austerity measures adopted in this period. In October-December 2009, public sector employees were sent in 6 days unpaid leave, saving the state about 250 million Euro (Diaconu, 2013). Moreover, the premium received during the public holidays and the payments of the 13th salary were removed for the public sector employees. Since August 2010, public sector wages were cut by 25% and VAT increased from 19% to 24%. Also in the public sector the payment of overtime work was eliminated (supposing that extra hours will be compensated with days off). Initially, the public sector wages cut by 25% was adopted by the Boc government as a temporary measure, to last only until 31 December 2010. However, despite the initial promises of the government, it took almost two and a half years until public sector wages returned to the level

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance, <http://www.antena3.ro/politica/zeci-de-dosare-ale-liderilor-pdl-au-fost-albite-de-justi-ia-controlata-de-regimul-basescu-192268.html>, accessed on 10 October 2013.

<sup>9</sup> For a list of public discourses of President Băsescu between 2005-2010 see: <http://cms.presidency.ro/?pag=67>.



they had before the 2010 cuts<sup>10</sup>. Moreover in 2011, the Boc Government took responsibility to Parliament for the new Labour Code. The law gives employers the opportunity to dismiss employees easier, increases probationary period for employees, introduces the 48 hours per week working program, and removes layoffs protection previously enjoyed by trade union leaders. During 2009-2012, about 70,000 employees exited public sector, through layoffs and retirements, while public sector employment was strictly limited: one new employee for 7 employee leave. Besides the macroeconomic stability benefits, anti-crises policies had very high social costs, since the population of Romania endured the most drastic austerity measures in the European Union (Diaconu, 2013).

Not surprisingly thus, the proportion of those who believed that in Romania things are going in the wrong direction substantially increased from 57% in December 2009 to 85% in May 2010 when the austerity measures have been announced by the President<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, the percentage of those who believed that their family has been affected by the economic crisis rose from 74% in December 2009 to 84% in May 2010. Meanwhile, Romanians' trust in political institutions decreased significantly, and more than 50% of the adult population blamed the incumbent political leaders for the current economic crisis in Romania<sup>12</sup>. This downturn of trust in political institutions most affected the Presidency (trust declined from almost 50% in 2009 to around 10% in 2011) and the Government (from about 20% in 2009 to around 5% in 2011).

The Government framed the budgetary cuts as vital measures to save money that can be directed subsequently towards investments in order to restart the economic growth. However, the austerity measures announced by the President and then implemented by the Government have been regarded from the beginning with suspicion by the population for at least two reasons. First, the austerity measures sharply contrasted with the electoral promises made only a few months earlier by politicians from all parties on the way out of the economic crisis. In addition, the argument that the savings resulted from budgetary cuts will be used for productive

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<sup>10</sup> During 2011, state employees' wages recovered only 10 percentage points of the cuts, and then in the second half of September 2012 and January 2013, the remaining of 15 percentage points has been recovered.

<sup>11</sup> IRES (2011) *Raport de evaluare Romania 2010 - Perceptia riscului si comportamente de adaptare* (Cluj-Napoca, Institutul Roman pentru Evaluare si Strategie - IRES).

<sup>12</sup> IRES (2011) *Raport de evaluare Romania 2010 - Perceptia riscului si comportamente de adaptare* (Cluj-Napoca, Institutul Roman pentru Evaluare si Strategie - IRES).

investments soon turned against the government when the media presented a number of dubious use of public money in so-called investments such as: building sloping football fields, constructing gyms in rural areas where very few children and young people live, and building gondola-lifts leading to no particular touristic sight. Such media accounts fuelled the public perception that government's "investments" were a way to channel public money to private companies controlled by the political cronies of the ruling parties, in a period when private service orders and resources were very scarce. They have also further supplied suspicions of corruption and cynicism since many believed that the government has only cut those public expenses that cannot be easily diverted to political clientele (i.e. wages in the public sector), in order to save more money for questionable investments which can be selectively allocated according to party interests. This belief deeply resonated with some of the slogans the protesters shouted to the ruling elites in the January 2012 demonstrations: "Please excuse us, we are not producing as much as you can steal!"<sup>13</sup> In addition, perceptions of governmental corruption and abuses of power became widespread. For instance, more than two thirds of the Romanians believed that the Prime-Minister is abusing his power, according to a nationally representative opinion poll carried out by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) in December 2010<sup>14</sup>.

Despite increasing grievances and contempt to the President and his Government, protests between 2010 and 2011 have been relatively scarce and ineffective. As a reaction to austerity measures announced by the President, trade unions organized several protest during the month of May 2010: street demonstrations of teachers, civil servants, medical staff, police, pensioners, and even mothers with small children. More protests came about in September-October 2010, when marches and rallies were organized in front of the parliament and in front of the prime minister's office in Bucharest by unions of nurses, professors, police officers, statisticians, electricity plant workers, and civil servants from all over Romania. On 24 September 2010, around 6000 policemen marched to the Controceni palace, where the headquarters of Presidency is located, demanding the resignation of President Băsescu and shouting for hours "Get out, you miserable dog", a slogan that has become famous latter for expressing people's anger and contempt towards their leader. Since no one came out of the Presidency (President Băsescu was not at that

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<sup>13</sup> The slogan rhymes in Romanian as: 'Vă rugăm să ne scuzați, nu producem cât furați!'

<sup>14</sup> IRES. (2012b) 'Romania 2012 - Analize privind percepția unor riscuri de securitate și respectarea unor drepturi cetățenești' (Cluj-Napoca, Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie-IRES).

time in his office) the protesters threw their police caps over the fence in the Palace courtyard. Several leaders of the police trade unions complained latter to the media about being persecuted by the authorities for organizing the protests<sup>15</sup>. Afterwards, the new Minister of Interior, Traian Igas, proposed that 10000 police officers should be fired as part of a restructuring process of the police.

Along with a much disciplined parliamentary majority (during 2010-2011), the perception of concentration of power was probably the main element which induced the closure and strength of the political regime. Using Kitschelt's (1986) terms, this regime was unresponsive to public demands and able to dismiss threats on its policy implementation. This closure of the political structure partially also explains the unsuccessful attempts of trade unions and other civil society organizations to curb austerity measures in this period. Several thousand NGOs are active in Romania and some are effective watchdogs on specific issues (such as media freedom, anticorruption, or urban development), though, by and large, Romanian civil society lacks mass support (Stefan & Ionita, 2011; Tătar, 2006). Moreover, even if during 2010 trade unions brought on several occasions thousands of unionists onto the streets to protest the severe austerity measures imposed by the government (Simon, 2012; Stefan & Ionita, 2011), their capacity to mobilize people outside the relatively small circle of members is by and large compromised by low levels of public trust in unions and their leaders (Tătar, 2015).

### **The revival of citizen participation: protests and voting in 2012**

All in all, protests organized by trade unions and civil society organizations as a response to austerity measures were largely unsuccessful in gaining wide popular support and thus to influence governmental policy between 2010 and 2011. Despite these failures, the economic crisis influenced people's attitudes towards politics in more subtle ways. Grievances started to accumulate in this period particularly because of perceived social injustice that accompanied the main austerity package adopted in 2010. Feelings of dissatisfaction, indignation and moral outrage mainly resulted from the belief that the Government has unfairly

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance the article 'Ieși afară, javră ordinară! Răzbunarea lui Băsescu împotriva polițiștilor care i-au cerut demisia, are efecte și după 28 de luni', Jurnalul National, 21 January 2013, available at: <http://jurnalul.ro/special-jurnalul/iesi-afara-javra-ordinara-razbunarea-lui-basescu-impotriva-politistilor-care-i-au-cerut-demisia-are-efecte-si-dupa-28-de-luni-634602.html>, accessed on 10.10.2013.

and largely placed the burden of the economic crisis on ordinary people, while in the same time kept the privileges of its own political cronies. Issues of corruption, clientelism and lack of accountability were frequently evoked by the media as factors contributing the Government's inefficiency in curbing the negative effects of the crisis. While political disaffection theories expect perceptions of unfair and defying treatment to make people politically cynical and apathetic, theories of procedural justice suggest that people's feelings of anger resulting from perceptions of being treated with disrespect, make them more readily to protest.

In terms of political attitudes, the perceived relevance of elections increased during the economic crisis. Since 2009, and especially after the adoption of the main austerity package in 2010, people became aware that as a result of certain political decisions their wages, pensions, social benefits can be cut, or they may lose their jobs and consequently cannot pay their bank loans anymore. In other words, people came to realize that politics is not an exclusive game that concerns politicians only, but it is relevant for anybody since it affects ordinary people's lives most directly. In this context, elections were seen both as a process through which social change can occur and also as a mechanism to penalize or reward politicians and political parties who were in power during the economic crisis.

Aware of people's eagerness to "punish" the ruling parties through voting, the Boc government tried to postpone local election, normally scheduled for June 2012. The government's strategy was to avoid an early electoral competition and to hold local and parliamentary elections the same day, at the end of 2012. But a ruling of the Constitutional court rejected this option as unconstitutional. While the government justified postponement and merging of local and parliamentary elections as a measure to save money, the opposition called for early parliamentary elections to be held together with local ones in June 2012 or even earlier. By postponing local elections, the government aimed to gain some time in order to adopt certain remedial policies, such as to correct the wage cuts taken in 2010, hoping if not to avoid, at least diminishing electoral casualties.

However, events stated to precipitate at the end of 2011 when the Government aimed to introduce a new health reform bill that would have reduced state funded health benefits, de-regulated the health insurance market, and privatized Romanian hospitals. One of the main objectors to this bill was the Health Ministry undersecretary, Raed Arafat, the founder of the "Mobile Service for

Emergency, Resuscitation and Extrication" (SMURD) in Romania. SMURD is a much appreciated public emergency service partially funded by the government and partially by private donations. Arafat's concern was the privatization of emergency services, which he believed would lead to the disappearance of the public service, as for-profit emergency service companies would have access to both private and public funds. President Băsescu criticized Arafat for his opposition and on 9 January 2012, in a phone call dispute with Arafat during a live TV talk-show, Băsescu suggested Arafat leave the Cabinet. Arafat resigned the following day arguing that he will continue to criticize the health bill from outside the government. During the next couple of days solidarity demonstrations with Arafat<sup>16</sup> and have been initiated by his fellows from SMURD in several cities with the help of the social networking websites.

The marches in support of Raed Arafat and SMURD have rapidly evolved in protest demonstrations spreading in over 60 cities in Romania and also in several European capitals. Protesters were expressing deeper dissatisfactions accumulated in recent years during which important decisions to people's lives were taken without public consultation and without a genuine social dialogue. The main goals of the protesters were the resignations of President Traian Băsescu and Prime-Minister Emil Boc, and early elections. Some representatives of the ruling party offended the protestors calling them 'worms that deserve their fate' and 'clueless and inept slum dwellers' who were instigated by the opposition. This defiant attitude has further fuelled popular anger. The demonstrations continued for several weeks in the University Square in Bucharest and in other cities of Romania and were mostly peaceful<sup>17</sup>, gathering thousands of protestors.

These demonstrations were some of the most important protest events particularly because they came after a decade of relative political apathy in Romania. Since they were not organized and appropriated by unions or any other civil society organizations, the protest demonstrations have been joined by diverse groups of people ranging from simply discontented individuals to NGO activists, nationalists, anti-capitalists, groups of the new right, ultras, monarchists, environmentalists and feminists (Stoiciu, 2013). What has united these diverse

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<sup>16</sup> Raed Arafat is a well known health care professional of Syrian origin who obtained Romanian citizenship after working for years as a volunteer for SMURD.

<sup>17</sup> Some clashes with the gendarmerie have been registered involving small groups of 'ultras' from the main football teams in Bucharest, who infiltrated protesters and provoked violent reactions from the law enforcement officers.

groups was the perceived sources of popular discontent which were represented by politicians, the Boc government and especially by President Traian Băsescu (Stoica, 2012).

However, the slogans voiced on the streets were just the tip of the iceberg of popular discontent. In other words, the protests were the visible and manifest part of widespread social discontents and frustrations accumulated over time and exacerbated by the economic crisis, the austerity policies announced by the President and especially by the public perceptions of the arrogant and defiant style in which the political elite has ruled Romania in recent years. For example, in a nationally representative survey conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy<sup>18</sup> between 28-29 January 2012, it is clear that the protests involved only a small part of the population, the hard core of protesters depicting the 1% who said they were demonstrating every day, plus other 4% who said they have attended protests sporadically. But according to the same survey, most of the adult population heard of the protest demonstrations (98%), which have been widely covered by the news media for weeks. In addition, 81% of respondents believed that the fact that these protests took place is a good thing, while only 13% thought it was a bad thing. The most important topics addressed by protesters, according to the respondents of the IRES survey, were the demands for the resignation of the President and the Government, the problem of low standard of living, low income and the lack of jobs<sup>19</sup>.

In early 2012, a prevalent belief among the Romanian public was that Romania has become a political regime with a single omnipotent power centre, which is the Presidency. This widespread belief did nothing but to block, once again, the dialogue and democratic public debate that could have prevented street demonstrations. Moreover, people's claims voiced during the protests in January-February 2012 (i.e. "We take our country back!") can be interpreted as demands for another, more participatory democracy: the need to return to a truly democratic governance in which all those who are affected by a public decision should be consulted and should have a fair chance to participate in some way in making that decision.

In general, political process theories predict that confrontational forms of

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<sup>18</sup> IRES. (2012a) 'Percepția agendei publice: săptămâna 22 – 28 ianuarie 2012' (Cluj-Napoca, Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie-IRES).

<sup>19</sup> IRES. (2012a) 'Percepția agendei publice: săptămâna 22 – 28 ianuarie 2012 (Cluj-Napoca, Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie-IRES).

protests, such as street demonstrations, arise when institutional channels through which citizens can voice their demands to the government are blocked and/or the authorities simply defy citizens by ignoring their needs and requirements. When there are no effective institutional channels of communication between politicians and citizens, people might view protests as extra-institutional means of political expression of popular discontent and of achieving political goals. It is likely that once demonstrations have gained momentum, protesters would no longer be willing to have an institutional dialogue with politicians whom they no longer trust. In this case, only re-legitimizing of political leaders through elections can provide a basis for initiating normal communication between citizens and politicians in a democratic institutional framework, in which both parties perceive each other as legitimate partners of dialogue.

The protests had also a significant effect on the structure of the 2012 electoral battlefield. First, they crystallized people's political and electoral choices in two major camps: one pro and one anti-government/presidential. Besides these two groups, a third category includes those dissatisfied equally with the entire political class. Moreover, protests have raised awareness and enabled the expression of latent discontent that lead to the cognitive political mobilization of a significant segment of the population who closely followed the demonstrations. Even if these people did not participate directly in the protests, they sympathized with the protesters seeing them as expressing messages that deeply resonate with views of the Romanian general public.

More generally, the protest of January 2012 had a series of impacts in various areas. I will use Kitschelt's (1986) framework to classify these into procedural, substantive and structural impacts. First, the protests had *substantive impacts* (meaning policy alteration in Kitschelt's terms) because they were followed by a series of "steps in retreat" made by the presidential camp in the first half of 2012 that eventually led to the loss of governmental power in April 2012. First, Raed Arafat was recalled and reinstated in his position at the Ministry of Health. Then, Boc government withdrew the draft law on public health reform from the governmental agenda. It also gave up the idea of postponing the June 2012 local elections in order to merge them with the parliamentary ones, scheduled for the end of 2012. After more than three weeks of protests, on February 6, 2012, Prime Minister Boc resigned trying to defuse popular anger. President Băsescu, who possesses the authority to nominate a new prime minister, replaced Boc with Mihai

Răzvan Ungureanu, director of foreign intelligence service. The new cabinet led by Ungureanu managed to preserve its support from the parliamentary majority only for about two months.

Second, the protests in conjunction with the upcoming elections also had *structural impacts* by putting pressure on political leaders and parties and affecting, in Kitschelt's terms, the structure of political opportunities. In this sense, the anti-governmental/presidential public opinion wave which has crystallized during these protests has intensified and turned into a strong pressure factor, especially due to the upcoming local and parliamentary elections. The prospects of an imminent electoral defeat stressed centrifugal movements within the Presidential camp. These centrifugal tendencies culminated in late April 2012 with the defection of some factions of the governmental coalition to the opposition which led to the loss of parliamentary majority. Consequently, the cabinet of Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu fell on April 27, after a no-confidence motion adopted in Parliament. The co-chairman of the opposition coalition, Victor Ponta, becomes the new Prime-minister supported by a parliamentary majority constructed around the Social-Liberal Union (USL). The Ponta cabinet organized the local elections held on June 10, 2012.

Third, the demonstrations had also a limited *procedural impact* taking into account that, for a short period of time, civil society organizations have been re-invited and re-accepted as legitimate partners of social dialogue. For instance, while in opposition the USL signed a charter with the Alliance for Clean Romania, a coalition of NGOs and unions. The White Chart of Good Governance, as it has been named, calls for transparency of public expenses, consultation with civil society on legislation, and limits on the use of emergency ordinances (Wagner, Iancu, & Dimulescu, 2013). However, latter civil society organizations have complained that after USL got to power it has breached the principles of good governance mentioned in the charter (Wagner et al., 2013).

Starting from February 2012, the intensity of protests has gradually decreased being defused by several measures adopted by the presidential/governmental camp, but also due to the prospective local and parliamentary elections. Elections have worked for some of the protesters as a valve through which frustration and dissatisfaction could be expressed through vote in order to penalize respectively to reward certain political competitors. The high turnout in local elections and the landslide victory of USL in most localities

from Romania suggest that the protests of January-February 2012 were primarily targeted against the president and his submissive government both of which being asked by demonstrator to resign. Eagerly wanting to get rid of their President and his Government after years of accumulated grievances, most of the protesters saw the main opposition parties (i.e. USL) rather as allies in achieving this goal. At least in this political battle they were fighting on the same side of the barricade. A few months later, people massively voted for USL both in local and parliamentary elections.

The local elections of 10 June 2012 did not provide a notable surprise through the election results, which have been largely anticipated by public opinion polls surveys, nor by the novelty of the electoral campaign strategies, as in general, the electoral competition has been trivial and devoid of major events. What did come as a surprise for many of those who have tried to frame the January 2012 protests as anti-political was the overall high turnout in these elections: 56.36%, significantly higher as compared to the 2008 local elections (48.79%) and parliamentary ones (39.2%), but also much higher than the December 2012, parliamentary elections (around 42%). People seemed to be very keen to use their vote to penalize the President's party by massively voting for USL, the anti-presidential coalition. This kind of protest voting may be one of the explanations for the relatively large turnout in the local elections in 2012, on the one hand, and the massive vote in favour of the USL and the crushing defeat of PDL, on the other hand.

Overall, the elections of 2012 led to a higher electoral turnout compared to 2008, both in the local elections and the parliamentary ones. This was so also because some parts of those disappointed with politics in general (i.e. the traditionally politically alienated people) were still mobilized to vote for populist parties. The ephemeral rise<sup>20</sup> of the short lived People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (PP-DD), which turned out to be the third political force in Romania after USL and PDL considering the percentage of votes casted in the 2012 local (over 9%), and parliamentary elections (around 15%) seems to illustrate this trend of political mobilization of those who are generally dissatisfied with the mainstream political parties and who vote for the highly unrealistic promises of populist leaders.

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<sup>20</sup> The PP-DD merged in June 2015 into the National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR).

## Conclusion

This paper presented the political and social developments in Romania in the context of the austerity measures adopted in this country during the economic crisis. The hardships created by these policies have provoked growing popular discontent that culminated in urban mass demonstrations in January 2012, and then resulted in a massive vote against the ruling party. The increased political engagement of Romanians during the economic crisis seems to break the general path of widespread estrangement from politics and public sphere, which has characterized the post-communist transition period of this country. After 1990, we can note a general decline of both electoral and non-electoral forms of political participation in Romania (Tătar, 2011a; Tătar, 2011b; Tătar, 2013) and an increased political disaffection of a significant part of the Romanian citizenry manifested by: lack of interest in politics, distrust of political institutions and politicians, political cynicisms, and a sense of personal inefficacy in politics. All these led to people's perception of a widening gap between political elites and citizens.

However, during the economic crisis, citizens' political and social responses to austerity measures indicate a revival of political activism. The economic crisis seems to have made Romanians more attentive to politics and more sensitive to issues such as governmental corruption and abuses of power. Moreover, people came to be more conscious about the effects bad governance can have on their lives. Starting from 2009 and especially after the austerity measures adopted in 2010, people come to realize that politics is relevant and it affects their lives most directly. Massive anti-governmental protests broke out in January 2012 when the Government proposed a new health care bill privatizing the hospitals and the medical emergency system. People perceived this as a direct threat to their lives, since in a "survival society" that perpetuates underdevelopment as Romania is often described (Pasti, Miroiu, & Codiță, 1997), fear of illness is one of the prominent concerns of the population. What has initially been a demonstration of solidarity with the opponents of this new health care bill, soon evolved into political protests expressing widespread social discontent and frustration accumulated over time and exacerbated by the austerity measures adopted during the economic crisis. In this context, the upcoming elections have been seen as a mechanism by which voters could sanction (or reward) politicians and political parties during the economic crisis. Citizens' increased interest in politics and their particular interest in elections during the economic crisis led to a higher turnout both in the local

and parliamentary elections of 2012, compared to 2008. A higher turnout in elections resulted also from the fact that the economic crisis created political opportunities for populist parties that managed to mobilize and get the vote from some parts of the electorate discontented with all the mainstream Romanian political parties.

More generally, the January-February 2012 protests seem to have had a *demonstration effect* for further elite-challenging actions. Since these protests had significant impacts they might constitute a precedent and trendsetter on how people can reverse certain governmental policies, how they can put pressure on the government through protest demonstrations, which eventually can lead to dismissal or resignation of ruling politicians. In this sense, the 2012 demonstrations seem to mark the beginning of a new cycle of contention in Romania. The most visible episodes of this protest cycle include massive demonstrations that recurrently erupted between from 2012 to 2015. The decision of the Ponta cabinet to adopt in August 2013 a draft law regarding the Roşia Montană the gold mining project brought several thousand people into the University Square in Bucharest and other thousands on the streets and squares of other big cities throughout the country. Protests started at the beginning of September 2013 and continued until the draft bill has been eventually rejected by the Parliament in December. In November 2014, demonstrations erupted both in Romania and abroad after the Romanian Diaspora's right to vote was hindered by the poorly organized presidential elections in the polling stations from abroad. Presumably, these protests have also mobilized voters in support for Klaus Iohannis who won the 2014 Presidential elections in the second round. Protests did not lack in the fall of 2015. At the beginning of November 2015, the Ponta Government resigned after thousands protested demanding politicians to take responsibility over the 'Colectiv' club fire that killed over 50 persons and injured other over 150 people.

Despite different triggering factors and participants, the episodes of contention that emerged in Romania in 2013, 2014 and 2015 have many common features with the January 2012 demonstrations. Compared with traditional protests organized by unions or other lobbies, for the 2012-2015 demonstrations it is hard to clearly discern an organizing core or the leaders of these protests. They have been joined by various people coming from diverse social groups and backgrounds, condemning the corruption, inefficiency and arrogance of the ruling elite. In this sense, the Romanian demonstrations of 2012-15 seem to link to the more general wave of protests spreading in the cities of the world (Della Porta & Matoni, 2014), challenging political elites and asking for a more open, transparent and participatory governance.

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